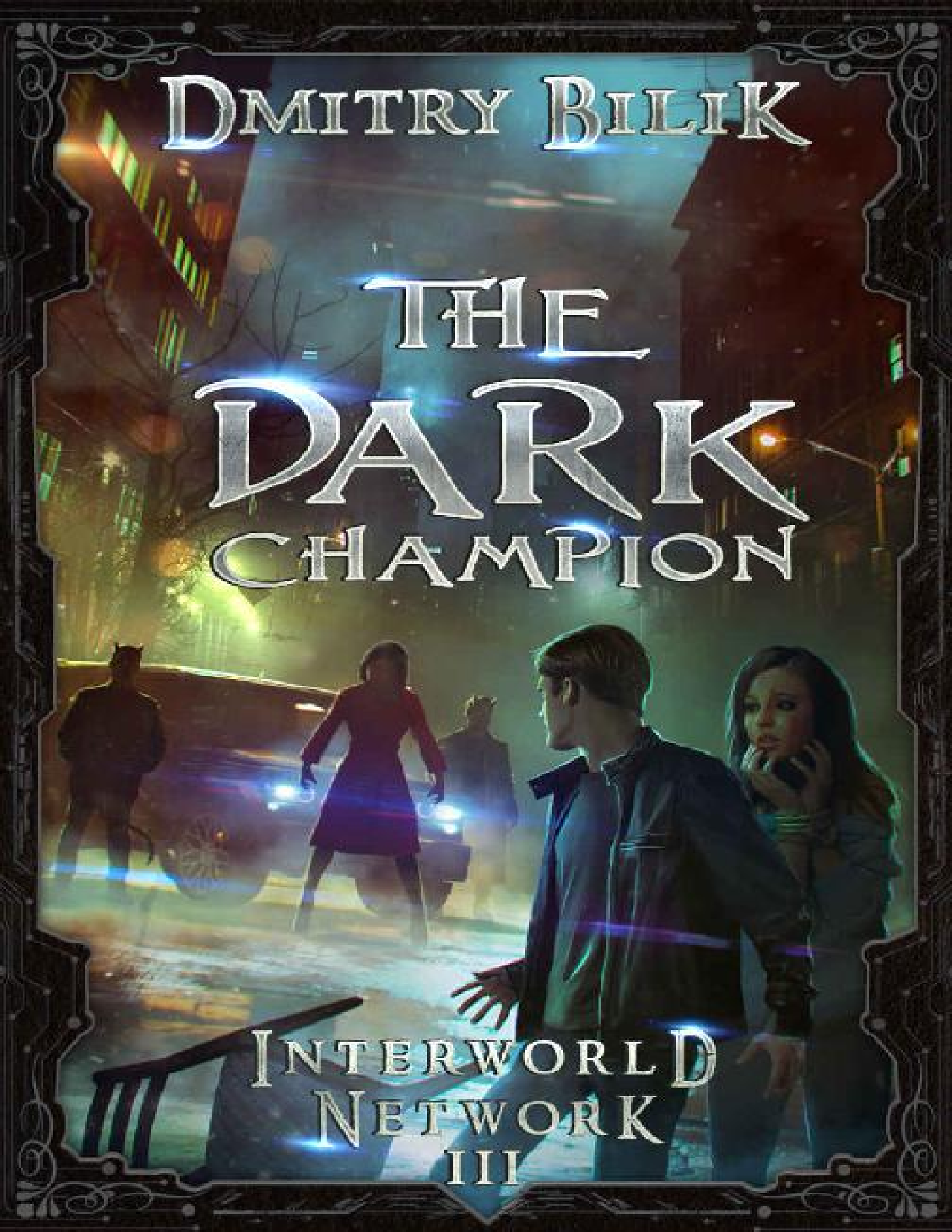
Dmitry Bilik
The Dark Champion
Interworld Network III

The Dark Champion

a novel
by Dmitry Bilik

Interworld Network
Book#3

Magic Dome Books

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Interworld Network
Book #3: The Dark Champion
Copyright © Dmitry Bilik 2020
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Published by Magic Dome Books, 2020
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ISBN: 978-80-7619-133-4

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Chapter 1

MORNING PHONE CALLS are rarely the harbingers of good news. Their insistent buzzing never awakes you to announce that you're the sole heir of a mysterious billionaire. Not even your employer would bother to give you a call just to tell you that they have an electrical problem and you could take the day off today.

Even less so when the phone screen displays the name of one particular catman you know. Yes, the one who'd spent the last few days whacked out on drugs and alcohol. Somehow I didn't think he was calling just to tell me he'd finally awoken to a brave new world, as in, *"I'm fine, no worries, thanks for checking in on me"*.

"Yes?" I invested all of my disgruntleness into the word.

"S-s-sergei? Th-th-this is L-l-litius."

He was stuttering, too. Which meant we had problems, Houston. "Yeah, I gathered that out."

"We n-n-need to see each other."

"Sorry dude, I don't really date men. Not beastmen, anyway," I cast a wary glance at Julia next to me but she seemed to be fast asleep. "Is it so urgent?"

"Ye-ye-ye..."

"I got you. Coming. Where, in the Community?"

"N-n-no! At th-th-the f-f-fu-"

“Don’t cuss, my phone will block you. At the Inn?”

“Ye-yes...”

“Litius?” Julia mumbled, stretching sleepily. “Who’s that?”

“Just some Lithuanian guy from work.”

“You meeting him at an inn?”

“Yeah, that’s what we call our cafeteria.”

Your Lying skill has increased to level 10.

You’ve achieved Mastery in the following skill: Lying.

Mastery level: 1

You’re now capable of deceiving any Commoner you talk to, even if facts blatantly contradict your story.

She reached out and kissed me on the shoulder.

I glanced at the clock. Half past seven, dammit! What was he like? For a catman, the guy was a real pig!

I slid back under the sheets and cuddled up to Julia but I was wide awake now. After a few minutes of tossing and turning, I finally got up.

“Are you gonna cook us another magic meal?” Julia asked without opening her eyes.

“Totally,” I replied unhesitantly because I’d just glimpsed Bumpkin who was already on his toes trotting toward the kitchen.

I quietly shut the bedroom door behind me and headed for the bathroom. As I stood under the shower's jets, I tried to take stock of everything that had happened last night.

Morbian was dead. The remaining Horsemen of the Apocalypse were on the loose. Things weren't looking good.

I brushed my teeth and took a peek in the bedroom. Julia was fast asleep. I tiptoed into the kitchen where Bumpkin was already busy cooking.

I pressed my finger to my lips, shut the kitchen door and turned on the TV. Of course, the Commoners' news had nothing to do with the Game's affairs but it just might shed some light on the recent events.

I zapped through channels until I found a newsfeed.

"The government of Italy is working hard trying to contain the consequences of the natural disaster. The number of victims claimed by the devastating tidal wave that swept over the entire coast has risen to one hundred and twenty, with three hundred and four seriously wounded and many more still missing..."

I switched off the TV and sat there in silence, clenching my head in my hands. A hundred and twenty dead! Just because the Horsemen had escaped! And that was only the beginning.

And all of this was my fault.

The realization flitted through my mind and promptly disappeared, replaced by a new thought which didn't feel like my own at all.

It wasn't your fault, was it? It was Morbian. He was the one who broke the seal, not you. Stop beating yourself up!

I shook my head, trying to expel the evil illusion as if it were a bad dream. What kind of madness was this? Was I developing schizophrenia? A

split personality disorder?

Although the voice in my head didn't make any more attempts to strike up a conversation, this didn't bode well. Something like this had already happened once to a certain individual best known as Gollum. As far as I could remember, it hadn’t ended very well for him. And seeing as I didn't know any shrinks specializing in the finer points of Players’ psyche, there was only one person I could turn to. He should know everything about it.

But that would have to wait. I had more pressing items on my agenda now.

I stole back into the bedroom. Julia was fast asleep with her arms sprawled over the bed. A few fine ringlets of hair rested on her brow glistening with perspiration. Her shapely chest rose and dropped under the covers in synch with her calm breathing. I’d have given everything just to climb back next to her and forget all about having to go see Litius. But knowing his restless nature, it wasn’t a good idea.

“Jul,” I ran my hand over her cheek, “I need to pop out to the office for five minutes. I’ll just give them some papers and be right back.”

She prized her eyes open. “Are you gonna be long?”

“Not at all. An hour, maybe. Just there and back again. Like Bilbo.”

“Like who?”

“Bilbo, the greatest hobbit of all times, the unparalleled burglar in the service of dwarves and the bravest halfling in all of the Shire.”

“Hey, is all this really necessary?”

“Sorry, didn't mean to upset you. But I think I know which show we’re gonna see next,” I kissed her on the nose. “Just to broaden one girl’s

horizons. If you get up before I'm back," I paused, listening to the faint noises coming from the kitchen, "breakfast's on the table."

She fell asleep almost straight away. According to my Mom, sound sleep was a sign of a clear conscience. If you followed that logic, my new girlfriend was innocence incarnate: she was sniffing away before I even made it to the door.

The cab promptly arrived before I'd even got the chance to get cold. Then again, how are you supposed to get cold when you're a Korl to begin with and the temperature outside was nothing like late January but more like early December?

Following Arts' earlier instructions, I gave the cabbie the address of a house on the same street within a walking distance from the Inn.

As it turned out, that had been a wise thing to do. As we approached, I noticed that the area was uncharacteristically busy. Not with Commoners, if you know what I mean, but fellow Players who literally crowded out the street bustling about like cubicle rats in corporate corridors on a Monday morning. All of them seemed to be heading for the Inn. What was going on there, an offer of free lunch or something?

I paid the cabbie and waltzed off to see what was the cause of all this hoo-ha.

You'd think this was some VIP event in progress, like the arrival of a freshly-Grammy-winning pop star. Talk about no place to swing a cat — any feline would be hard pressed to thread its way through a crowd like this, let alone a fully grown Korl like yours truly. Somehow I squeezed in, to the cussing of all those packed in the doorway, and set off in search of Litius.

Which proved not to be so easy. Three other catmen were sitting to my left and yet another one by the window. Luckily, by now I could tell

them apart, so after a while I managed to locate Litius sitting in a corner next to Arts and Traug.

Locating them was one thing; trying to elbow my way through to them was something else entirely. I very nearly got into a fight after I'd inadvertently trod on some Abbas' foot. He swung round, his face a mask of fury, the black growths on top of his head twitching — but once he saw me, his expression changed to that of... embarrassment? He mumbled something to the extent of "mind where you're going, dude," then stepped aside — or tried to, rather, as far as the crowd could budge. Still, he kept his eyes fixed firmly on me. What a strange individual.

"Hi," Arts said, grinning.

I wanted to rub my eyes. Was it my imagination? But no, she really was smiling at me.

Litius all but jumped from his place at seeing me. But Traug was just sitting there dark as a thundercloud staring down at his glass of... of *water?* What was this, some kind of parallel world or something?

Litius proffered his furry paw for a handshake. "Gr-gr-greetings, Sergei."

I squeezed his mitt, then shook hands with Traug. The latter was in a bad way. It wasn't even about his wasted looks — so far as I knew him, my fellow Korl was in an almost permanent state of hangover — but he appeared gloomy like a tourist who'd boarded the wrong plane and ended up in Vladivostok instead of Amsterdam.

"What's going on?" I asked Arts.

"Can't you see? Everyone's watching the arrival of the Horsemen in our world. No matter how hard you try, you can't keep a cat in a bag for very long."

Litius perked up. “You see, the innkeeper is quite a well-known sorcerer,” (as usual, the moment he showed interest in a subject, his stuttering was completely gone) “A while ago, he managed to trap a part of a Seer’s development branch into a powerful Wenter crystal. Or split it, if you wish. The Player whose development branch it was kept some of it while the crystal seized the other half.”

“I didn't know you could do that,” I said.

“You can’t,” Arts replied. “No idea how this fish eater comes up with all this nonsense.”

A faint smile flitted over Litius’ face, making him look even more like a cat who’d got the cream. Unfazed by the girl’s comment, he went on,

“The Seer in question survived the ordeal. When in due course he died, he passed on his part of the development branch to somebody else entirely. But the crystal is still going strong. In the meantime, as Cesspit kept interacting with more technologically advanced worlds, it managed to advance its own development. That’s when the sorcerer thought of hooking up the crystal to humanity’s latest discovery: a TV set. And that’s how this TV here shows everything pertaining to other Players as soon as Commoners get wind of their activities.”

The girl sniffed. “What a lot of bull. I’ve known the innkeeper for decades. He never told me anything like it.”

“So how does his TV work, then?” I asked her, smiling.

The girl shut up. Maybe Litius’ story was a bit too far-fetched for comfort but it made sense. Also, considering both his *mentate* nature and his aptitude for procuring data, I had a funny feeling a lot of his story could actually be true.

Just as we spoke, the TV showed some Guards searching through the debris. Clad in their long black robes and masks, they slowly walked

through the desolation left by the earthquake, holding their hands before them as if feeling their way through a dark room.

Out of curiosity, I pulled out my True Mirror and managed to peek into it to see what commoners must have seen on the TV screen. All I saw was a group of rescue workers in bright overalls walking along the ruins with their rescue dog.

“Are they looking for survivors?” I asked.

“Yeah. The place is absolutely riddled with Guards,” Arts replied. “Some are trying to save those who can still be saved. Others search for the Horsemen.”

“Any success?”

“Do I look like they might tell me?” the girl said. “It’s not as if I’m on the Sachem’s visitors list. Having said that, speaking to an Antenor might be a better idea. Alternatively, we could ask one of the Seers. So all we can do at the moment is watch some TV, really.”

Now that was a thought. I *was* on the Order’s Grand Master’s visitors list, was I? So that’s what I could do, pay him a visit. Ask after his health, why not? He’d told me to call him Numa, hadn’t he? Provided Google hadn’t lied and provided I’d spelled the name right, that particular Seer was older than Two-Face himself.

“Okay, I might look into it later,” I replied. “But I got the impression that we have more important things to tackle now. And I don’t mean our friend Traug finally going straight.”

My remark had a rather unexpected effect. Arts openly laughed, staring at Traug who gritted his teeth and crossed his arms defiantly. Litius’ tail twitched nervously. Apparently, my earlier practical joke suggesting same-sex (or trans-species, rather) relationships must have had the desired effect on their male egos.

‘Traug, you okay, man?” I asked innocently. “The beer isn’t to your liking?”

“I’m fine,” he grumbled, glaring daggers at me. “I’m perfectly fine.”

“Are you sure?” I insisted, doing my best not to burst out laughing. “It’s just you’re a bit funny today. You haven’t said anything yet. And you haven’t touched your beer.”

“I think you have a point,” Traug shook his usually disheveled mane which was neatly ponytailed today. “It’s about time I kick the habit. Drinking can cause all kinds of problems.”

“Sure. One day you might wake up and discover lots of new things about yourself.”

I just couldn’t hold it any longer. Arts had kept giggling the whole time. She looked totally different now that her brother’s problems had finally been resolved. She wasn’t so stuck-up anymore — she was, how can I put it... more alive? And now she just snorted, covering her face with her hands. Her shoulders shook, betraying a laughing fit.

My face, too, dissolved in a smile, so I hurried to explain before I cracked up, “Traug, man, I’m sorry... it was me...”

I didn't get the chance to explain because both Arts and I guffawed out loud, so that the Players nearest to us lost all interest in the TV and glared at us indignantly.

It took us another couple of minutes to calm down and tell Traug about my practical joke. My breath still heaving, I hurried to get it off my chest while I still could — because judging by Traug’s expression, my future didn’t look too rosy.

A heavy silence hung in the air once I'd finished. And then... Traug exploded with laughter.

"Litius, did you hear that? Those motherfuckers! It was them!" he slapped my shoulder nice and hard. "You bastard! That was you all along! Litius, did you hear?"

"I did," the catman replied melancholically.

"You bastard!" Traug gave me another hearty slap on the shoulder which made my Health bar quiver.

Your Unarmored Combat skill has increased to level 10.

You've achieved Mastery in the following skill: Unarmored Combat.

Mastery level: 1

Allows you to absorb all damage dealt by a blunt weapon once per combat.

I immediately put it to good use, because the over-emotional Traug gave me yet another slap on the shoulder, the strongest of the three. Normally, you'd need a new titanium prosthetic shoulder after a slap like that because your own would only be good for a scrap heap. But no, this time my Health bar hadn't even twitched.

"Flippin' jokers," Traug grumbled, climbing to his feet.

"Where're you going?"

"Gonna get myself a drink."

"I thought you said drinking caused all kinds of problems?"

“Ah, forget it,” Traug waved my objections away. “It worked out fine in the end, didn’t it?”

He elbowed his way past all the seatless Players who crowded the area around the tables, cleaning his path to the bar with all the resolve of an icebreaker.

“So what was it you wanted to talk to me about?” I asked Litius, gingerly feeling my shoulder.

“He managed to track down the vendor," Arts butted in. “Come on, Lish, don’t drag it out! Speak up!”

“I will if I’m given the chance,” he replied with the air of dignified pride — apparently in retaliation for ‘the fish eater’. “The vendor goes by the moniker of Clinger. His real name is François Soler. Initiated as Player nineteen years ago. He specializes in rare items and has Player clients from all over the place, not just the neighboring worlds but even from Qird and Archaeth-”

Litius promptly shut up because Traug was already back clenching seven beers. He gave us one each and kept the remaining four.

I shook my head. “Not for me, thanks. I still have lots of things to do.”

Arts pushed her mug away too. Litius, however, took a few feline laps of his drink as was his habit, then downed it in one gulp.

“Most of his clients are Archali,” he went on. “But about a month ago, he apparently discovered that one of his items was missing. He accused the Archali of theft and stopped all dealings with them. Then he traveled to Noggle.”

“Why Noggle?” I asked.

“According to the information I have, he plans to hire a few mercenaries and retrieve the stolen item from the Archali by force.”

“Plenty of hotheads there who’d be willing to do that," Traug agreed, sipping his beer.

“Oh. What makes you think that the missing item is what we’re looking for?”

“Because there was an announcement from the Archali not so long ago saying that they’d managed to seize a major artifact in battle, something which was considered lost for centuries. Certhall, it’s called. Here’s where it gets complicated. It has no surviving description in any of the known books or chronicles. All we know is that at some point, it used to belong to the first general of all legions. I had really a lot of data to process, which was why our friend here kindly got me some *stok*.”

My eyebrows began to rise. No, not because even Litius with his superbrain needed an occasional illegal upper. But — he’d just called Traug his friend! Even I had never been heard saying anything like that.

In order to conceal my amazement, I pretended to be actively interested in the conversation. “Okay, but that didn't mean Traug had to get high as a kite too!”

“It’s just because, you know, whenever I take it, I sort of become a different man,” Traug replied. “Someone who’s strong and handsome. All bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, if you know what I mean. Girls just throw themselves at me. While Litius was busy with them books, I met two chicks like you’ve never seen,” Traug made some rounded gestures in front of his chest which probably didn’t refer to the girls’ IQ levels.

I had to motion him to stop. At the moment, I wasn't really interested in his sexual exploits. I needed to know what kind of information Litius had unearthed in our library. “Spare me the details, will you? So Litius, where were you?”

“I found no documented evidence of the artifact whatsoever. What I did find was a few mentions of it in a number of ancient epic poems. Here’s what the medieval *Tale of the Host of the Holy* says:

And then he adorned the sword with the stone;

His black soul rejoiced at the devilish deed;

But his wretched designs will soon be overthrown:

The hour will come and Certhall will be freed.

“There’re several less significant mentions in other sources, but all of them describe Certhall as a stone.”

“Oh well. What was it the prophesy said? ‘*The disappearance of a stone in Cesspit might change the direction of a trade route in Elysium.’* It seems to fit. The question is, how to lay our hands on it.”

“There’s only one man who seems to know where it might be, judging by the fact that he’s looking for mercenaries,” Arts pointed out.

“Sure,” Traug said. After a moment’s hesitation, he pushed another beer toward Litius. “And if he’s looking for them in Noggle, that means he can’t be too hard to find, either. So! When are we going?”

I didn't believe my ears. “Are you guys coming with me?”

Arts shrugged. “You saved my life twice, so that’s what I owe you, right? Not to mention the money I still need to pay you back.”

Litius swished his tail. “As far as I gathered, these stones possess some amazing powers. I’d love to be there when they manifest themselves.”

Silence fell. Finally, Arts and Litius (and admittedly, myself too) turned to Traug.

He downed his mug, set it back on the table and let out a hearty belch. Then he gave us a long look, winced and scratched his forehead.

“Honestly, I’m not the most popular man in that part of the world,” he said. “Lots of Noggleans can’t sleep at night thinking about Traug of Keralon and how they’d love to slip a knife between his ribs. But for someone like you, why not? I’m getting a bit rusty in this hole. It’s no good for a warrior’s blood to go stale. And I can see there’s never a dull moment with you. On one condition.”

“Which is what?”

“No more practical jokes!”

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Chapter 2

THE WORST THING a single man can see in his bathroom is a second toothbrush. Because, as he well knows, it'll soon expand to include several rows of various kinds of face lotions, body lotions, hand lotions, foot lotions, shampoos, hair conditioners, hairsprays, peeling creams, peeling gels, etc. etc.

Which explains why, when I came back and popped into the bathroom to wash my hands, I eyed a brand-new toothbrush with some apprehension.

"Everything okay?" Julia asked from the kitchen.

She was wearing my misshapen old T-shirt. Admittedly, she looked much better in it than I ever would.

I smiled. "Yeah, that was nothing. They might be sending me on another business trip pretty soon."

"Not again! When? For how long?"

"They don't know yet. They need to look at some paperwork first. And what's on your agenda?"

"I need to see my thesis supervisor. I want to show him the beginning of the chapter."

I'd have loved to sabotage her work. I could have talked her out of going; we could have stayed in bed all day chain-watching *The Lord of the Rings* followed by *The Hobbit*. Still, I too had a few things to take care of.

I needed to speak with Hunter ASAP.

So as soon as I saw Julia out the door, I hurried to the foundation pit, dreading to be late for my training. I wanted to have a nice long talk with Hunter.

I needed to tell him the whole thing. I had some questions to ask him. And I also hoped for some advice on how I was supposed to go on with my life now.

Still, the wind-swept foundations were deserted. No sign of Hunter anywhere. I waited for a good twenty minutes just to be on the safe side, to finally realize one thing: even Korls could freeze to near death if they're stuck out in the cold motionless for long enough. I dialed him a couple of times but his cell was out of range.

I went back to see if he was home, but no one answered the door. That only left the Community. So that's where I headed next.

As I rode the cab, I kept biting my lips wondering what could have possibly happened for my mentor to forgo our training session.

At first glance, the Community appeared to be under martial law. Six Guards by the entrance stared hard at me as I walked past but chose not to say anything. Once inside, they were fewer: only an occasional patrol and three more groups guarding respectively the Syndicate, the other exit and the actual Gates. Having said that, they didn't appear too numerous: definitely a fraction of what I'd seen here last time, when the whole Order of Seers had been massacred.

I couldn't find Hunter anywhere here, either. He hadn't been seen in the shops nor in the Syndicate. By the same token, the place was remarkably uncrowded today. Whatever Players I came across sported some sort of grim determination in their stares. According to my Observation Skills, they were all following the same route, some heading toward the Sachem's residence, others leaving it.

How interesting. My legs carried me after them on their own accord.

Once I skirted the corner of the familiar building, it was my turn to stare hard at the scene. No wonder the place appeared deserted! Everybody was here. Two Guards, assisted by several of the special-ops Players I'd seen here before, were busy controlling a neat line of people who apparently all had an appointment to see the Sachem. Further away from the door, the line dissolved into a disorganized crowd of onlookers like myself.

Pretending I'd noticed someone I knew, I stepped aside and started watching all the comings and goings. All sorts of Players entered the Sachem's house. Some left it almost straight away while others lingered inside, apparently to be properly interrogated.

The visitors' emotions differed greatly too. Most of them couldn't conceal happy grins on their faces; some even paused to show their wrists to all the others, marked with identical signs drawn in what appeared to be silver paint. The sign depicted two crossed lines within a circle; a third line, longer than the other two, cut the circle into two identical halves.

Some of the others, however, left the Sachem's residence looking grim and unwilling to answer any questions, apparently in a hurry to leave the Community.

"Sergei?" Hunter's voice came from behind me. "What are *you* doing here?"

He grabbed me by the shoulder and dragged me aside, apparently not very happy to see me. I did glimpse the same silver pattern painted on his wrist, slightly bigger and more pronounced than the others'.

"I just thought I might join your club," I said.

"Oh do shut up! Follow me."

He all but dragged me toward the Syndicate right under the stares of the disinterested Guards who in fact demonstratively turned away. What kind of police misconduct was this?

The Syndicate was virtually empty. Hunter dismissed the hopeful bartender who'd rushed toward us, then sat at a table, all the while doing his best to avoid my gaze.

"I'm a lousy mentor," he said softly.

"What are you talking about? I've learned so much from you!"

"But you could have learned so much more. Never mind. We're a bit pressed for time now. We need to get the Order prepared. I hoped we might have had some more leeway."

"The Order? You mean the guys who paint people's hands with silver paint?"

"This isn't just paint. It's a powerful spell. It's a mark bonding us all together. If one of us dies, all the others will sense it straight away. If one of us needs help, we'll all come to his or her rescue."

"So you're gonna fight the Horsemen?"

"Not exactly. This wasn't our Order's original purpose. Once we'd lost it, the Order disintegrated. All that's left of it now is a few keepers of the holy artifact. Which is now gone too."

"A few? That was a lot of people over there!"

"The surviving Order members have brought their students who have in turn invited their own. Cesspit is a quiet little place, perfect for those who've strayed away from their destined paths. It's safe enough for experienced Players to survive. But still our ranks are dwindling. Besides, we have to reject lots of applicants."

“Why?”

“Didn’t you hear what Horsemen used to do?”

“Yeah, sort of, but...”

“They set up some kind of competition amongst Players, a sick chess game using human lives as expendable pawns. Or did you really think that just four Horsemen could have wreaked all that havoc in the past centuries? They had lots of minions among Players who’d chosen to join the rule of the fittest. Once the Horsemen had been captured, they too were declared outlaws and hunted high and low. We got some of them, but others managed to escape.”

“Do you think some of them have survived? You think they’re gonna join the Horsemen?”

“They already have. There’s something you need to understand. The upcoming battle isn’t a petty squabble between a bunch of demented demigods and Cesspit’s existing powers that be. This is a confrontation of two opposite forces. There’ll always be those who are unhappy with the established order, but the most dangerous of them are those who’ve been dormant but are capable of awakening at a moment’s notice. They are the worst.”

“That’s why you decided to call up the Order?”

He shook his head, despondent. “Not because of that. Our purpose was different — but it has something to do with the Horsemen, anyway. That’s all I can tell you, I’m afraid. We might not see each other for quite a while now. I sent my wife away to her sister in Novosibirsk. I just hope she’ll be safe there. That leaves you. Please try to stay out of any big battles while you can. They’re still gonna find you, I’m afraid. If you have any questions, ask them now.”

I felt at a loss at the sheer amount of information he'd shared — Hunter wasn't the talkative kind — but I had to get a grip. "Who gets someone's Avatars after the person dies? When Morbian died, I was offered a choice of three. I took one. What happened to the other two?"

"No one's gonna tell you that. It sort of goes in suspended animation, or so I call it. For instance, when such a Player dies in an accident, it doesn't mean that the Avatar will go to any initiated Commoner who happened to be the closest to the scene. He or she should also have a certain affinity with it. Which is why the Avatar might actually go in suspended animation, withdrawing into oblivion to wait for the right Player to come its way."

"Wait a sec. Does that mean that the reason I got the Savior was because the Chorul had had it? Or because it had been waiting for the right candidate?"

"I don't know. Could be either. Choruls might know something about it."

"And one more thing. If Avatars are sort of sentient, can they try to control their host? You can have affinity with some of them, I understand that. But what about those which were simply gained because you happened to be in the right place at the right time?"

He perked up. "Why, did something happen?"

"I don't really know. It was like I was hearing a voice inside. But it was speaking so clearly that I could tell that what it was saying wasn't my own thoughts at all."

"Avatars do have a certain influence on their hosts, that's true. But at the moment, you've got nothing to fear. Better to be a powerful source of Light with a tiny spot of Darkness inside than the other way round. If push comes to shove, you can always reject the Avatars gained accidentally."

His words felt strangely off-putting. “*Reject* them?”

“Yes. That would allow the rejected Avatar to withdraw back into oblivion to wait for a more suitable Player. But few people are capable of that. Avatars are too rare and too expensive to waste. If someone like Morbian only had three... mind showing me what you got off him?”

I reached into my inventory, produced the stone and the crossbow and laid them on the table in front of him.

Hunter leaned toward the items without touching them, as if wary of somehow damaging them, and studied them from a distance.

“You need to find a good jeweler who can cut this stone properly,” he finally said. “It might be able to improve any item’s stats. Having said that, it might turn out to be a dummy. But this,” he pointed at the crossbow, “this is a fine item indeed. I haven’t seen such craftsmanship in quite a while.”

“It comes from the world called Smithery.”

“That’s what I thought. What’s your Shooting level?”

“Eh, I don’t have any yet. Even that one time when I pumped that gun, I didn't get any.”

“That’s because you should fire a gun, not ‘pump’ it. Never mind. I’m not the right person to teach you — and we don’t have the time, anyway. But I have this friend. He used to be constantly on the road, but about a hundred years ago he decided to go back to his roots. He’s the best person to teach any kind of small arms. And as far as I remember, the crossbow has always been his favorite.”

“Who’s that?”

“You can call him Will. Just tell him I sent you. He makes sure that strangers can’t find him so easily, so he’s gonna ask you who you’re from. Here, take this,” my mentor materialized a gray crystal which glistened all over like a brand new Lada Granta. “This isn’t for you. Give this to him in exchange for your tuition. I’m not sure he’ll go all out but he *will* show you the ropes. And this is for you. My gift to you before we part.”

The dust in Hunter’s hands transformed into another crystal, its facets glistening gold. Although not as big as the gray one, this one looked sort of better defined, like some posh work of art. It was a shame to crumble it, really, but my curiosity took the better of my inner esthete.

The crystal fell apart, making me one spell richer.

Veil (Modification). A one-off ability to absorb all magic damage.

Cost: 100 mana

Duration: 60 min

My breathing seized. I now had both protection spells. I’d have loved to also have anti-magic which Harph had cast back on the hill but that would have been too greedy.

“Thanks a lot,” I said.

“Enjoy. One day you might need it. Here’s Will’s address.”

I kept wondering how much dust my mentor had splurged on me today. The Veil alone must have been a pricey thing to get; and the gray crystal, judging by its sheer size, must have been even more expensive. The only cheap thing that Hunter had given me was a parchment with a map drawn on it. Oh yes, and by the way, I could make maps myself now too! Hadn’t I made a little sheet of parchment just like this one, with a marker for Talsian’s digs already set up for the city guards’ convenience? And I’d done it correctly the first time, no verification codes required!

The parchment in my hands shrank and crumbled to the table. It appeared to have smoldered away — but leaving no ashes behind.

I checked my interface map. A small dot had appeared right in the middle of Europe — not so far from Paris, actually — marking a new town. Its name was Biel. All the other places available to me on the map had two names: their real Game names in brackets next to their Commoner ones. But this one didn't. It was Biel. Just Biel.

"So when do you want me to go see him?" I asked.

"The sooner the better. Okay, I must be off now. See you soon... I hope."

The expression is his eyes was sort of weird. Remorseful? He shook my hand, patted my shoulder and left the Syndicate.

I put all the stuff into my inventory and glanced at my phone, mulling it over. The day had only just begun. I had nothing to do today, really. A teleport by Gates only took a couple of seconds. I could get there and speak to Will, why not?

But first I needed to redeem my reward for the completed mission.

The guy behind the counter didn't look happy as I poured all the fluorites' little wings — which Arts had helped me to collect — in front of him. The moment I handed him the piece of paper with the mission, he impaled it on the spike.

In less than ten seconds, I was already leaving the Syndicate with two hundred grams of Dust in my pocket. Wish everything in life were this easy.

I expected to be stopped at the exit, quite prepared for an ID check and a thorough search for any illegal substances where the sun didn't shine.

Still, the Guards simply turned their masked faces in my direction, following me with their melancholic stares. It must have had something to do with a Player who stood at some distance from the checkpoint. My Insight identified him as a Perceptionist.

Still, even when I got to the Gates, my tribulations hadn’t ended there. Firstly, I had no idea how to get to that Biel place. It wasn’t in the Gatekeeper’s big fat book of available destinations. The only thing I knew about it was that it was somewhere in Switzerland. Which in turn, if I wasn’t mistaken, was somewhere between Germany, Italy and France.

I could have checked the map in my mobile phone but it didn't work here, did it? It looked like I might have to leave the Community just to Google it.

I heaved a sigh and shook my head. The biggest problem with our generation was that without our gadgets and the Internet, we didn’t have much to show for ourselves. I’d already worked that out when I’d read all those books about portal travelers who ended up somewhere in the Dark Ages. I wouldn’t want to be in their boots, thank you very much. Those medieval people would have had me hanged or otherwise executed as an absolutely useless creature. All of humanity’s experience and knowledge are worth jack if you don’t know how to apply them in practice.

I was about to turn round and leave the Gatehouse when a husky, slightly otherworldly voice echoed under the vaulted ceiling,

“The map’s on the last page.”

It sounded like sandpaper scratching glass.

With a startle, I swung round. No, the giant statue of the Gatekeeper stood perfectly still, legs akimbo, the tip of his two-handed sword resting firmly against the floor, his hands closed around the hilt. He was the epitome of those empty suits of armor frozen in time, like the ones guarding the entrances to Scottish castles.

“Thank you,” I said, just in case.

Indeed, the map took the last two-page spread in his book of destinations. It was masterfully done, drawn by hand in the tiniest detail. The unknown artist depicted flybacks circling the sky over England, snapdrakes grazing in Australia and some terrifying monsters prowling the South American prairie.

Finding Biel on it was a job and a half; I only found it in the end thanks to my Observation Skills. It was in fact slightly to the north from Bern which was marginally bigger. I leafed through the book: yes, you could get to Bern for a whopping seventy-two grams of dust. What were they like with their prices!

Still, all my indignation was for nothing. The city of Bern was crossed out from the list, with a note *“opens in 4 hours”*.

“Can’t I get to Bern?” I said. It wasn’t a question even, just me thinking aloud.

Imagine my surprise when the giant statue replied,

“The portal to Bern will remain closed for the next four hours.”

“Why, are you short of staff? You guys have your hands full too?”

Still, he must have decided that he’d said enough. Never mind. I could still go to Lutum, or Paris as commoners called it, which was open and was only a stone’s throw away from Bern. I could teleport there, rent a flyback and head directly to Biel from there.

Especially seeing as that particular transfer was dirt cheap: thirty-two grams. They had some funny ideas about their prices. Could it be because very few people actually traveled to Bern, forcing them to put the fare up? God knows.

I produced the required amount of dust, poured it into the bowl and touched the moon stone. “Lutum!”

After that, I spent the next thirty minutes in the capital of France, trying to exchange some dust to euros and find an English-speaking cab driver. What can I say? You’d better brush up your French skills, guys. No one in Paris is gonna speak English to you.

Finally, I managed to find a cabby — whose English was actually quite decent — to take me to the flyback drivers’ depot. I activated Map Making, entered our destination in it and immediately announced with the air of an expert that he’d just taken the wrong turn. The route via Rue de la Chapelle was apparently much shorter, so he shouldn’t be trying to take the scenic route in the opposite direction.

And oh miracle — after a few minutes the driver stopped trying to take me for a ride (literally), saving me a couple of euros which my interface promptly informed me about:

Your Bargaining skill has increased to level 6.

We parted with a respectful handshake, perfectly pleased with each other’s company. I even started walking toward the airport while waiting for him to drive off, and only then headed in the right direction. Probably. I felt pretty helpless alone in a foreign country, without a visa or language skills, and I doubted I’d be able to recognize the depot — simply because last time I’d been here it had been nighttime.

Luckily, unlike the cabby, my Map Making skill couldn’t cheat. I found the depot pretty soon. As always, its smell preceded it. I saw a flat platform covered in straw and a guy climbing off the flyback which had just landed. Further on, some workers were busy preparing a carriage for a whole group of Players.

I picked the driver who looked the loftiest and most unhurried, then headed toward him. “Hi. I’d like to rent a flyback.”

“A carriage or a mount?”

My heart dropped. I tried to steady my voice. “A mount, please.”

“Where to?”

“Biel.”

“It doesn’t have a landing site, does it? The closest you can get is Bern.”

Fail number one. “Okay, how much is it to Bern?”

“Eleven grams.”

I handed him the money, then watched, faint-hearted, as he waved to one of his assistants.

After a couple of minutes, they led my dragon to me. He was slightly bigger than a snapdrake, with spiky wings and bright red skin. He walked calmly, craning his neck as he walked in a most funny way. Still, I could read mistrust in his eyes whenever he looked at me.

“How many times have you flown before?” the chief driver asked.

I’d have loved to exaggerate but I was so scared that I blurted out the truth, “This is my first flight.”

“Then remember the rule. It’s simple. You’re only allowed to land at landing sites, unless it’s a dire emergency. If you land in the middle of the city, you’ll have to deal with the local Guards. Is that clear?”

“What’s a dire emergency?”

“That’s when either you or your mount gets seriously injured by someone. But even in that case you’re obliged to land as far from the commoners’ eyes as you can. You should then find a hiding place for your mount and head toward the nearest community. Listen carefully. Rules are there for a reason.”

I kept nodding without taking my eyes off my flyback’s long muzzle. The air around his nostrils hazed; the dragon half-opened his jaws as if jeering at me. Never mind. It ain't over till it’s over, mister.

“Come on, jump on board,” one of the drivers finally said.

Compared to the snapdrake, this thing had considerably more safety belts strapped to it. The driver’s assistants helped me to tighten them around me. One of the mages cast several unhurried spells on me. According to him, they were supposed to protect me from the wind and other elements. Why not, after all? A freebie is a freebie.

When they were finished, I tried to gently pull in the reins.

The dragon growled unhappily and slapped his tail on the platform. He took a few running steps, picking up speed, then kicked himself off the ground. In just two powerful wingbeats, we climbed high, circling the landing site; then the flyback began to ease himself away from his home.

About five hundred yards to our left, an airplane was approaching the runway; further on, several more were about to take off. And there I was in the midst of it all, riding my own dragon and offering my face to the wind which indeed didn't hamper me in the slightest.

My heart was overflowing with childish delight — the feeling you can only get from simple and pure things that money can’t buy. My flyback kept growling unhappily but made no attempts to compromise my trip. I clenched the reins tight: thanks to my Riding skill, I felt perfectly

comfortable controlling him as if I’d been doing this since a very young age.

The coquettish little houses of Paris lay far below. We’d already left behind the large round spot of the airport with runways raying out of it. Smiling and gasping as if short of breath, I rejoiced at the sight of fields in front of us.

The flyback’s body shuddered as a spasm surged over it. My heart beat faster.

With a loud popping sound, we vanished into thin air.

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Chapter 3

THE BIGGEST TRICK in life is to die young albeit as late as possible. Which wasn't an easy thing to do when you had a flyback as willful as mine. After the first teleport, once we were out of the drivers' eyeshot, the dragon must have decided he was a jet fighter pilot showing off before a doting audience. Why else would he indulge in such crazy aerobatics, making me eternally grateful for the sheer number of safety belts bundling us up together? Had it not been for them, I might have already gone on my first free-fall jump.

Still, after we'd teleported a second time, he sort of accepted his fate and his rider. Me too, I was beginning to realize there was no escape now. I even tried to steer him just a little. The dragon grumbled a bit just to save face, but obeyed. We descended until we got lost amid the fluffy clouds, then resurfaced again.

It was a very eerie feeling. Almost as if I was flying a small plane. Thanks to all the spells cast on me, neither the wind nor the cold and mist didn't inconvenience me in the slightest. What I did feel was freedom — and also something else, something so surreal I couldn't really put my finger on it. The well-trained flyback resembled a homing pigeon: he knew very well where to go, only reacting to my commands to change altitude. Barring the fact that the earth was far below, this was little more than a kiddie ride.

After our fifth teleport, the dragon began to come in to land.

When we'd emerged from the cloud layer, the first thing I saw was a town center and a meandering river hugging it on three sides, giving it a semblance to a medieval castle surrounded by a moat. It flashed past — blink and you'd miss it, just like the rest of the town. After Prague, Bern hadn't impressed me at all. I suppose I was getting a bit spoiled.

Both the airport and the flybacks' landing site next to it were tiny. Apparently, flying wasn't en vogue here. My flyback made a circle around it, preparing to land. With one last wingbeat, he began gliding down. The impact sent my stomach into my throat — but he was already skipping and hopping along the runway until finally he came to a halt, braking with another wingbeat. Then it was all quiet.

"Good afternoon, Sir," the chief driver said, a short stocky man with a nice thick beard. "Welcome to Bern. Come on guys, unstrap him."

Less than a minute later I slumped to the ground, feeling as if someone had run my guts through a blender. Still, I would have lied if I said I hadn't like it.

I walked over to the dragon who was drinking greedily from a pail of water. Gingerly I touched his hard warty skin. He started, stopped drinking and raised his head. For what felt like eternity, we stared into each other's eyes, my hand still resting on his rough scaly hide.

The dragon broke eye contact first and lowered his head back toward the pail. I ran my hand along his rough back.

You've taken the first step toward acquiring the Chimera Whisperer ability.

"You like flybacks, don't you?" the chief driver asked with a lopsided grin.

I smiled back. "Yeah... I suppose so."

"They're proud old things. They can't stand cowards. If you lose their respect, redeeming yourself in their eyes ain't gonna be easy. Anything else you need?"

"Actually, yeah. I'd like to rent a snapdrake to take me to Biel."

“That’s not a problem. They might not be as fast as those in Lutum or Athern, but they’ll still get you from A to B.”

He sent someone to get one for me. In the meantime, I opened the map and found the placemark I needed. I used my Cartography skill to highlight it — and hey presto, I could physically sense the air current urging me toward Will’s hometown. Those Swiss and their tongue twisters! Going to Biel to see Will!

The snapdrake they brought me was indeed not the youngest one but he seemed strong enough. He stuck out his long tongue, licked the palm of my hand and sniffed. I couldn’t tell whether he was happy or not.

“That’ll be eight grams,” the chief driver pronounced. “If you can’t make it back today, just set him free. He'll know how to get back home.”

I nodded and paid him. Then I mounted the beast, strapped up and gently heeled his flanks. The snapdrake took an unhurried start past the few houses, leaving the depot behind and giving the town of Bern a wide berth. As they say, an old horse won’t spoil the furrow — and this one definitely wouldn’t; in fact some young ‘uns could learn from him.

It took me a few minutes to realize I could have haggled with the driver. I mean, eight grams for less than a ten-minute ride? Even if you threw the cinematographic Swiss landscapes into the bill, it was still a bit steep. Having said that, I still had to get back — plus I might have to spend some time at that fabled crossbowman’s place.

Biel was literally the blink-and-you’d-miss-it kind of place. I hadn’t even noticed it. We turned off to a small snowed-in road and kept going, raising a tall pillar of sleet in our wake. Some accidental observers probably saw me as a reckless roadhog in a posh sports car.

Thick woods crowded along my path, reaching out to brush me with the tip of a branch or toss a snowy acorn at me, indignant at the

inconsiderate bastard who'd dared disturb their sleep. Finally, after yet another vertiginous bend, my snapdrake stood still.

I breathed in rapid shallow fits to counter the nausea as I took in my bearings. A neat two-story house was perched in a clearing. Although it looked as if it had known better days, you could tell someone was still living there. An ax was stuck in a woodblock next to a generous woodpile in the back; a whiff of blue smoke escaping from a flimsy chimney — definitely a DIY job — was hardly a sign of a deserted dwelling.

I dismounted. Remembering what I knew about snapdrakes and their willful nature, I led my mount to the woodpile and tightened one of the straps around a small pole. First I needed to meet that Will person, then I'd decide what to do with the mount.

So! I knocked on the door and prepared to wait.

For any self-respecting introvert, meeting new people presents some degree of stress. Even though I wouldn't describe my condition as a fully fledged social phobia, when presented with a choice between new company and a nice quiet evening sipping beer in front of the computer, Sergei Demidov always opted for the latter. And here I was now, trotting around Cesspit meeting all kinds of weird creatures. I hadn't just left my comfort zone: I'd simply ripped it to shreds.

The door opened. Instinctively, I tilted my head up.

Will was... huge? Yes, huge is probably the right word. The guy seemed to have stepped off the cover of a 1970s bodybuilding magazine: well over 7 foot, with biceps as thick as my thighs, his unbuttoned shirt revealing an equally powerful chest. Having said that, he did appear slightly stooping.

Ah, and the most important thing: he too was a half-blood Korl. Meaning that he had long thick blond hair ponytailed in two or three places Traug-style, a pair of pale blue eyes and a determined jaw. Female Players

must be turning to jelly at the sight of him. Basically, the guy was as good as it gets — barring his manners.

“Who the hell are you?”

Those Barbarians. “I’m Ser- er, Serg. I’ve come here from Sorrow.”

I must have gotten off to a wrong start because he closed one hand around my throat until my vertebrae crunched.

Okay, okay, I got it. First impressions do matter. Let’s do this again.

[∞]

“Who the hell are you?”

“I’m Sergei— er, Serg. Hunter’s student. He sent me to see you. He said you could teach me to shoot properly.”

“Hunter’s student?” he asked, looking like a curious lepidopterologist studying a rare butterfly. “Hunter doesn’t take on students.”

“He made an exception this time. And he gave me something for you. Here.”

With the sleight of hand of a market pickpocket, I produced the gray crystal. I’d have given my eye tooth to find out what it actually was. Somehow I didn’t think it was a run-of-the-mill ability you could get from a regular shop. It must have been something truly rare, judging by the look on the man’s face.

Will gave me an impression of a grim loner with a socialization problem. Here he was, holed up in the middle of nowhere and using

firewood for heating in the twenty-first century. What kind of Player was he after that? Surely he could heat his house with fire magic?

“Give it to me,” he all but snatched the crystal from my fingers. Instinctively I shrank my hand back, letting go of Hunter’s gift which dropped onto the doorstep, breaking in two.

Oh. But surely he could still use it, even broken?

I stared at the crystal as it crumbled to dust. Bummer!

[∞]

“Here.”

“Give it to me.”

“Not so fast,” I put the crystal back into my inventory. “Let me guess what you’re gonna do once you have it. You’ll slam this door in my face, won’t you? And that’s the best-case scenario, I suppose. I wouldn’t put it past you to break me a bone or two. Let’s do it this way. You teach me the basics of shooting. Then I give you the crystal. This way everybody’s happy.”

Your Persuasion skill has increased to level 17.

“Come in,” he grumbled.

His house was a real den. Rough handmade furniture, an oil lamp on the table and an impressive fireplace built with big chunks of stone. All he needed was a couple of animal pelts to complete the interior design.

Will sat at the table and pointed me to a spare stool in front of him. “What is it you want?”

“I was to learn how to shoot a crossbow.”

“A *crossbow?*” he sounded amused.

“Yes, I know it’s not the most popular weapon. But Hunter said you were the expert.”

“Hunter talks too much,” he grumbled. “Show me your crossbow.”

I produced my Pistol Crossbow Baby-1.

Unlike my mentor, this guy showed some interest in it. He took it in his hands and studied it with apparent pleasure, looking at it against the light and all but sniffing it.

Then he gave it back to me. “God toy,” he chuckled his approval. “I could try and teach you something, I suppose. But I can’t guarantee the result. That’s something that only depends on you. You can sleep in the cowshed. There’re no cows there anymore. The smell still lingers though.”

“What do you mean, sleep? Aren’t we going to complete my training today?”

“Today?” he smiled for the first time. At least I thought he was smiling even if it looked more like he had a pinched facial nerve.

Then he crossed his arms and shook his head. “Before, it took me a couple of years to train a decent crossbowman. A year tops. A month for a half-decent one. But that wasn’t difficult. But you’re talking about what, one day? Can’t do that. All I can teach you in a day is how not to kill yourself with your plaything.”

“Okay. How about a few days?” I offered a compromise, racking my brain for a suitable excuse to explain my sudden disappearance to my nearest and dearest. Friends were no problem — I could just tell them the

truth, as in ‘gone on business for a few days’. But what if my parents had another one of their crazy ideas? And then there was Julia...

“A few days,” Will repeated, as if tasting the word. “Well, all the better for me, then. The sooner you’re done, the sooner you’ll leave. But I’m gonna take the crystal anyway.”

I nodded. The Korl slapped his knees and rose to his feet. “Wait outside. I won’t be long.”

I went out, pulling the phone out of my pocket. Arts’ number was ringing. Thank God!

“Arts, hi, just listen to me. I might be away for a few days. I’m fine. I’m in Cesspit.”

“What do you mean, you might be away? What about Clinger?”

“He’ll be all right. I just have some business to take care of. I’ll be back in a couple of days and then I’ll tell you. Could you do something for me?”

“What’s that?”

“Could you please go over to my place? I have a message for Bumpkin.”

When I’d finished talking, I texted Julia just to say I was sick and had a really sore throat. She showered me with replies promising to come and bring me all kinds of remedies. In the end, I had to activate Persuasion in order to reassure her that I’d be fine. Once that done, I put the phone away.

All that time, I could hear some racket coming from the house, which sounded like a squad of rookies looting an arsenal. Finally, my host

reemerged. Judging by his heavy gait, he must have had all sorts of things on him.

“Let’s go,” he said.

Realizing we were about to leave him alone, my snapdrake began to dash around his tether pole. Which was something I hadn’t thought of. The pole could be as strong as it wanted but it wasn’t going to survive the animal’s desperate thrashing about.

Will gave the mount a grim look, then started for him, apparently intending to do him some bodily harm. I had to adlib.

“Wait!”

I ran in front of him, standing between him and my mount. I laid my hand on the anxious animal’s neck and looked deep into his pitch-black eyes. Sniffing and shaking his high-cheekboned head, the snapdrake gradually began to calm down until finally, he stood perfectly still.

“It’s okay,” I said. “He won’t be any trouble.”

“I can see that,” Will snapped, walking past us around the house. “One of them Whisperer tricks. Just remember: if he does the place some damage, I’m gonna make him into sausages. Hurry up.”

I did my best to hurry up — the problem was, our speeds didn’t exactly match. His “fast walking” was my “slow running”. Prickly frozen grass crunched underfoot; the bare woods stared silently into our backs; the only picturesque part of the surrounding scenery I could see was Will’s back in front of me.

“Have you known Hunter for long?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“Did you start out together?”

“No.”

“Did you travel together?”

“No.”

“D’you share some interests or hobbies?”

“No.”

“Your name, ‘Will’, is it short for William?”

“If you don’t stop pestering me, your head will part from your body sooner than you think,” he said, turning to me without slowing down. “When I say — you listen and absorb it. Like a sponge. No need to reply. Just nod.”

“But I need to understand what I’m doing, right?”

“Don’t you worry about that. I’ll knock all the knowledge you need into you, even if you kick and scream.”

I wouldn’t say I felt like leaving right there and then but it did give me some panicky ideas. There I was — okay, admittedly I’d come here on my own accord, I wasn’t kidnapped or anything — but all it would take is a whack on the head — or not a whack even, a mere flick of his meaty finger would be enough to make me disappear for good into these woods. Then he could take the crystal, the crossbow and everything else he wanted. He hadn’t appeared very happy to hear Hunter’s name.

I pulled out the phone to tell Arts where to look for the last resting place of my fearful frame, but Lady Luck played another trick on me: I was out of range.

“Don’t lag behind,” Will grumbled. “You might get lost before you know it.”

He even waited for me to catch up with him before setting off again. Now we walked next to each other, almost hand in hand, heading downhill, until we came to a small cave.

“Over there,” Will pointed.

“Are you sure?”

“Over there.”

The look in his eyes reminded me of dirty old men stalking innocent schoolboys. It was as if he already had a plan which might not appeal to the other half of our little traveling party.

He shoved me inside and walked after me. Now I was cut off from the rest of the world.

Bye, Mom... Dad, Daria, Lily... bye, Bumpkin. So much for my shooting practice.

Still, there was a strange thing happening: the further we went, the lighter the cave became. It wasn’t supposed to be that way, was it? That wasn’t how caves should normally behave.

After another couple of minutes, I knew the answer. I stood facing a rather long valley locked by lowish mountains. The only way of getting here was through that cave — or rather, a tunnel that cut all the way through the cliffs. And I wasn’t sure I wanted to know how it had formed in the first place.

Will walked over to a large smooth boulder which looked rather like a sacrificial altar, and started emptying his inventory.

Several submachine guns, a rifle, a small caliber with optical sights, half a dozen handguns, an air gun, a shotgun, and a couple of very impressive contraptions of apparently otherworldly nature. By the time he was finished, there was no space left at all on top of the boulder.

“Take your pick,” he said and walked aside toward a long crevice.

I lingered over a few of the handguns, constantly changing my mind, until I chose... well, a gun. No idea what it was called. A small black handgun with sharp angular edges.

In the meantime, Will was busy doing something in the crevice like a fisherman retrieving his nets. He rummaged through something in dead seriousness, freezing for a few moments, then resuming his manipulations.

Finally he stood up, holding a small critter in an outstretched hand. It looked a bit like a capybara with the hind legs of a kangaroo and perfectly human arms covered in thick hair.

The sight of the creature’s head sent shivers down my spine. It too was almost human albeit missing a nose and with long rabbit-like ears.

The Korl gave the monster an unceremonious slap on the face. And another. After his fourth blow, the creature began to squeal, trying to bite him. Which was apparently the effect Will had been trying to achieve.

“You have three or four shots before the Wizzitgon gets to you. Do it.”

He turned to the monster and pointed me out to him.

The creature’s unkind eyes focused on me. He bared his teeth.

Will lobbed him through the air like a basketball. The creature flew a good twenty feet through the air, landed on his feet and darted toward me, of all people.

Holy mama mia! I pointed the gun in an outstretched hand, trying to take aim, and squeezed the trigger. Or tried to squeeze the trigger, rather, because nothing happened. Either I had a faulty gun, or the problem could actually be me.

And the wretched thing was almost upon me!

I flung the gun aside and summoned the only thing I knew how to use right now: magic.

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Chapter 4

EVERY KID under the age of forty experiences some kind of reverent awe at the sight of a weapon, whether it's a brand new handgun smelling of grease or a knife that cuts through a sheet of paper like through thin air. Forget little children with their toy cars, dolls and action figures: any man who'd ever had the chance to handle any kind of weapon will dream of doing it again one day.

There's only one problem. Weapons — and especially firearms — don't suffer fools and greenhorns gladly. It just so happened that my Dad had never bothered to introduce me to this side of life. He'd never taken me to a shooting gallery or shown me how to fire a gun. In his world, a man could live his entire life without ever having to reach for one.

But in this world here, weapons were a must. Not that I was doing a very good job of mastering them. It's true that I wasn't the naïve snotty Player I used to be only a month ago. All I had to do was stretch out my hand to conjure up the Bloody Whip which had already become my favorite spell. I could have used the knife or the Katzbalger, I suppose, but over time, I was gradually learning a very basic tactic: if you could keep your opponent at a respectful distance, that's what you should do.

The whip whooshed through the air, avariciously homing in on its target. For a brief moment, I had the impression it was actually alive: hungry and spiteful. It entwined the creature's leg, throwing the little bastard off balance. I followed it up with an Electric Arc which had almost finished him off when all of a sudden Will dashed toward us, shouting. In a few powerful strides he reached the creature and, judging by the color of the spell, began healing my attacker.

"You can't do it to them," he explained. "They don't like magic."

“Can’t do what? That’s what you said, didn’t you?”

“That didn’t give you the right to kill it!”

“What?”

“They’ve been living around here for two hundred years or so. Stupid things. I bring them some food once in a while. They’re good for training newbies.”

“Can I do it again?”

“You can,” Will said, picking the creature up. The Wizzitgon was gradually coming round, turning his head in a daze. “That’s what people call them, Wizzitgons.”

“People? You mean, commoners?”

“Yeah. They can’t see them. The word is a bastardized form of “Where’s it gone?” These idiots love sneaking into human dwellings hoping to find something nice to eat. And they’re thieving bastards, too, but they’re also quite absent-minded. If they see a bunch of keys, they’ll steal it but if they discover something else that attracts their attention, they’ll dump the keys to pick it up. Still, they don’t really live among humans for very long. Normally, they just eat their fill and move on.”

“So that’s who’s been stealing my socks out of the drawer?”

“You keep your socks out of it. They’re very few of these little goofies left in the wild, I’m afraid.”

“Why?”

“They get killed for their fat. It’s extremely valuable. There’re a lot of Players around who’d do anything to lay their hands on at least one of these little critters.”

“Why, what’s so special about it?”

Will took a few more steps and picked up the handgun I’d dropped. He wedged the creature between his legs so he couldn’t escape and showed the gun to me.

“Next time, don’t forget to take off the safety catch.”

He racked the gun and lifted the Wizzitgon in the air by the scruff of his neck like a kitten, then shot him in the belly several times. The creature screeched, kicking his little legs in the air, but showed no intention of dying.

Will turned him toward me. Not a trace of blood or death throes, just a squinted look of grim disapproval on the little monster’s face.

“Their body is enveloped in a thick layer of very viscous fat. That’s what protects them against any damage, and that’s what makes them so valuable in Players’ eyes. No amount of small or medium caliber can hurt them. They might crap lead the next day, that’s the only inconvenience.”

His cynical attitude took me aback. Using a living thing for target practice was a bit over the top. I’d never been a hunting enthusiast, and now I lost all desire to continue firing at the defenseless creature.

“Can’t we just use tin cans or something—” I offered.

“We can,” he agreed, “only that way it might take you a hundred years and all the tin cans in Cesspit to level up. Hold the gun and get ready. I’m releasing him.”

This time the Wizzitgon had no intention of attacking me. He just ran for dear life. By the time I’d overcome my pangs of conscience, he was already a good thirty feet away. Finally, I fired.

I suppose you could say I missed although I did hit a large boulder miles away from the creature. Funnily enough, the moment I squeezed the trigger, my conscience sort of calmed down.

In the end, I hadn't hit him once, having wasted the whole clip. The Wizzitgon happily got away.

"And you wanted to be done today?" Will shook a disapproving head. "If it goes like this, we'll be stuck here for two months."

He spent the next half-hour teaching me how to fire a gun. Just fire it, without aiming. For the first ten minutes, I just held it getting used to its weight and pointing it. After that Will finally allowed me to pull the trigger.

The thunderous noise made my ears pop — and still I had this feeling of excitement growing within me. I very nearly shouted, "Bring that thing back in!" Who would have thought?

It's probably worth mentioning that in all that time, my skill hadn't risen a single point. Probably I did indeed need a real target. Or at least a piece of cardboard with a few circles painted on it.

Still, my new mentor didn't paint Wizzitgon or anything like that. Completely consumed by my new gun, I hadn't even noticed he was already holding another little critter just like the first one in his hands. Having said that, maybe it *was* the first one. There was no way I could tell, was there?

"Reload!" Will shouted.

I removed the empty clip, clicked a new one in and chambered a round. That seemed to be correct.

"Ready?" Will asked.

"Yeah."

He used the same method to aggro the Wizzitgon as the first time, by slapping him. Once the creature began to grumble and tried to struggle free, Will turned the angry creature toward me and lobbed him in my direction.

This time I was smarter. I pointed the gun at the spot where the Wizzitgon was about to land, then gently squeezed the trigger. Now... Bang bang bang!

My first two shots missed him by a mile. Not because my opponent was exceptionally agile — to tell you the truth, he moved like a koala bear after a vacation at an all-inclusive resort. But my third shot hit him right in the chest.

The Wizzitgon didn’t scream, just grunted unhappily. He momentarily lost his footing but promptly resumed his attack. Stubborn little thing. I fired again, this time more confidently albeit with equally unstable results. Still, I managed to hit him three more times.

Your Shooting skill has increased to level 2.

I flung the gun aside and hurried to cast Mantle. Just in time, too, because the Wizzitgon bared his uneven teeth and went for me. He slammed into the power shield and dropped to the ground, rubbing his bruised muzzle.

Your Modification skill has increased to level 3.

How interesting. Did that mean that in some schools of Magic, you only leveled up when the spell you cast produced the desired effect? In other words, I could cast five Mantles in a row and still didn’t get any points. But if they actually did their job, my chances to level up would improve respectively.

“Quit tossing guns around,” Will said, picking up the creature. “Reload.”

He walked back to his place. History repeated itself.

After another half-hour my Shooting froze at level 4. That’s when Will switched to the shotgun, explaining me how to hold it, load, aim and shoot. Admittedly, I liked it much more. It exuded a certain confidence, if you know what I mean.

The shotgun must have sensed my respect and replied in kind. My very first shot hit the target, raising Shooting another level.

“Keep it straight!” Will shouted from the sidelines.

God knows I was doing my best. The Wizzitgon did too, judging by his enthusiastic screaming.

Your Shooting skill has increased to level 6.

This time the creature didn’t charge at me. He turned off halfway and trotted off, shouting something about “those cunning Players”.

“Will, can I try the submachine gun now, please?”

“This is an assault rifle. These are the firing modes.... Don’t point it at me!”

I tried to focus and listen to the theory, dying to get to shoot some more. My body was seething with adrenalin, preventing me from remembering the information. Will wasn’t happy and he didn’t hesitate to show it, chewing my ass a couple of times. Where Hunter had been a considerate tutor trying to point you in the right direction, Will literally beat the information into you with a stick. He probably just wanted me to give him the crystal and piss off.

Time flew like crazy — or rather, I simply didn't notice it go by. Only once did I zone out when the system informed me of awarding me level 10. I paused to reread the few lines:

You've achieved Mastery in the following skill: Shooting

Mastery level: 1

Both your hit ratio and reload rate of throwing weapons have improved!

If I remembered rightly, the crossbow was a projectile weapon. The reload rate didn't interest me much but the hit ratio sounded just what the doctor ordered. Apparently, the projectile weapons were at the very bottom of the Shooting skill hierarchy which was why it was the first to level.

My absent-minded musings earned me another poke from Will, followed by a good box around the ears that sent stars floating before my eyes.

Your Unarmored Combat skill has increased to level 11.

It took us a really long time, and still we weren't done. I hadn't even got to try all the weapons. Will made me fire the wretched air rifle for an hour at least, while I never got to use the truly amazing otherwordly contraptions.

At a certain point, Will simply walked over to the pile of weapons and scooped it all up back into his inventory. I checked my interface: my Shooting skill was now at 15. Not bad for one day!

Without saying a word, Will headed for the cage's mouth. I had nothing left to do but trot after him.

"It's not evening yet! We could practice some more!"

“You shouldn’t overdo it. You’ll suffer tomorrow as it is. It’s normal. You can’t keep upping the same skill, it’s gonna cost you. Also, we still need to get your bed ready.”

I thought he was joking. He'd already told me I was to sleep in the cowshed, hadn’t he? And now it turned out I still had to get my bed ready? Was he going to turn his cowshed into some sort of three-star hotel to accommodate his useless students?

As it turned out, my sarcasm was lost on him. Will hadn’t been joking — I doubted very much he was capable of joking at all.

A cowshed? — Yeah maybe it had once been one, two hundred years ago or so. Now it was basically a cross between a garage and a warehouse for the entire population of the nearby town of Biel. An old tractor, a trailer without wheels, a rusty wood heater, a stack of enormous glass bottles (the word “moonshine” comes to mind) and a whole heap of steel parts of apparently otherworldly origin.

“There’s some straw over there behind all the junk. Get some over here, clean up a little and make yourself a bed. I’ll get you some food in a while. If you leave the shed, I’ll break your neck.”

“So what am I supposed to do here?”

“Whatever you want. Meditate.”

Was he joking? Shit. He looked dead serious. I watched his monumental bulk leave, then started to clean up some space for myself.

The tractor proved to be the heaviest — but in the end I managed to roll it over to the wall, thanks to whatever Korl blood was still left in me. The rest was easier, even though my back began to hurt from the unusual exercise. My hands felt numb, too.

Finding inspiration in the old adage claiming that “Clumsy hands make hard work harder”, I’d very nearly gotten to the straw when I finally received the magic message,

Your Athletics skill has increased to level 11.

You’ve reached level 11

Available points: 3

Strength: 29 (x)

Intellect: 23 (x)

Fortitude: 26

Agility: 26 (x4)

Stamina: 21 (x)

Rhetoric: 27 (x)

Speed: 17 (x)

That’s what you got for leveling Shooting alone! This must have been the reason I’d only received one bonus: the one to Agility. On the other hand, it made things easier for me. This way I could focus on my weakest attributes, namely Speed and Stamina. I now had 40 charges which were still just enough for 4 cooldowns.

“Are you finished?” I heard behind me.

I almost choked on my own Adam’s apple. Will sounded very pleased with himself. He stood there holding a mug in one hand and dark strips of something in the other.

“I got you some beer and dry meat. The beer I make myself; it’s not completely matured yet, but I drink it. I fed your snapdrake. Get some rest now. Next practice tomorrow.”

With that, he was gone.

I tasted the meat which turned out to be tougher than Captain John Silver’s peg leg. I munched on it for a couple of minutes but in the end was forced to spit it out. It was too salty and didn’t taste nice at all; I’d rather go hungry. The beer tasted like vinegar. I had a funny feeling Will was testing me.

I poured the beer out in a corner and put the meat away in my inventory. Let him think I’d eaten it. It ain’t over till it’s over, mister!

I didn’t sleep well at all. The straw turned out too prickly; my fabled Korl blood refused to warm me up, and the wind was so loud as if it was trying to rip the roof apart. The only other sound was the groaning of the trees outside, which sent spooky shivers down my spine. The place appeared dead; even my snapdrake didn’t show any signs of life. I now doubted very much whether Will had indeed fed him — and even if he had, what kind of chow he’d offered him. I was developing a very bad feeling about that ogre of a man.

I only managed to doze off in the morning — and once I was starting to fall properly asleep, I was shoved unceremoniously awake.

Will was holding a stale flatbread and a mug of some herbal concoction which tasted vaguely reminiscent of green tea. It must have been the saddest breakfast in my life: the morning twilight framed by the black doorway; the unsavory taste of stale bread, and not the best-humored host waiting for me to finish.

Once I was done, he simply walked out. By now, I’d known him enough to realize I was supposed to follow. He wouldn’t bother to ask me twice. The guy was a great conversationalist.

I moved on autopilot. I felt awfully weak; I'd have given anything for another hour of sleep. Besides, my shoulder was in agony after yesterday's shooting practice. It must have been the rifle: it had one hell of a recoil. Still, I chose not to inform Will of my need for some medical TLC. He'd just have mocked me, as simple as that.

By the time we reached the secluded valley, dawn was already breaking. Will must have calculated the time of our arrival. He obviously had a plan. He walked over to the boulder and started laying out the guns. Only one handgun today, plus the shotgun and lots of ammo.

After a moment's hesitation, he also produced some weird and wondrous contraption and laid it on the very edge.

"I'd noticed yesterday you seem to have a propensity for a certain type of weapon. So that's what we're gonna start with."

So there we were again: new day, same shit. The long-suffering Wizzitgon really didn't know what we wanted from him — but having received sufficient encouragement, he would finally aggro me, barging at me at full speed while I peppered him with lead until he'd decide he'd have had enough and leave the scene. Rinse and repeat.

By the same token, if the day before we'd tried every weapon only fleetingly, today Will made me spend a lot of time practicing each type, including a good two hours with the handgun. But once we'd finally reached the weird and wondrous contraption, I well and truly enjoyed myself. It turned out to be some sort of a reinforced kinetic cannon. I had one hell of a fright when it sent the Wizzitgon flying a good hundred feet through the air, slamming him against the rock wall. But that had given my Shooting skill — which had been stuck at 19 for quite a while now — the boost it needed.

Your Shooting skill has increased to level 20.

You’ve achieved Mastery in the following skill: Shooting

Mastery level: 2

Both your hit ratio and reload rate of firearms have improved!

Had someone told me a week ago that I’d reach mastery level 2 in Shooting, of all things, I’d have laughed in their face. I’d never been too interested in firearms — but here I was, standing amid the sea of spent shells covering the entire clearing from just two days’ practice.

“So you’re ready now,” Will said. Somehow he knew about my progress.

He cleared the boulder from all the weapons and produced three crossbows: a really tiny one, an average-sized one and an enormous one. First thing he did, he forbade me to fire them. Then he told me to pick up each one in turn. All I had to do was keep the moving Wizzitgon in my sights, ready to squeeze the trigger at a moment’s notice. Predictably, my first attempt missed him by a mile. And the second one. And all the following ones.

“Don’t lower it so much. Keep it steady.”

“But it’s heavy!”

“Don’t think about it. Your crossbow is part of you. It’s your right hand. It’s just like you grab your opponent with your right hand and you hold him tight.”

“Can I take the smaller one, please?”

“You will, once you learn to fire this one.”

Only when I’d completely lost all hope did I finally hit the target — probably, by sheer accident. The Wizzitgon yelped his discontent, pulled

out the bolt and dashed off. That lent me some confidence. After three more wasted attempts, the creature voiced its indignation again. And in another quarter of an hour, I successfully passed the test as six out of my nest seven bolts had hit their target.

The system wasn't late in commending me:

Your Shooting skill has increased to level 21.

Only now did Will allow me to take up the smaller crossbow — the medium-sized one.

At first, things didn't go well: I missed a couple times and even received some minor damage as the Wizzitgon had given me an angry bite. It didn't feel very nice, to tell you the truth. But after that, things went rather smoothly. It had only taken me ten minutes to move to the tiny crossbow.

That's probably when they mean when they say that it's the weapon that chooses its master. After the heavy and cumbersome large crossbow, the small one lay into my hands with a natural ease. The very first bolt hit the Wizzitgon in his fat belly.

Will didn't allow me to fire it again. He released the poor creature and walked over to me. "Now take your own crossbow."

I produced the Baby from my inventory. My fingers lay on its handle which seemed to be custom-made for me.

"What do you feel?"

"I feel strong. I feel calm."

"Good. Which means tomorrow your training will be over. You'll give me the crystal and finally get the heck out of here."

“So what’s tomorrow?”

Was it my imagination or did I see a sarcastic smirk flitting across his face? He ran his giant hand over his forehead, glanced at the rapidly setting sun and replied through almost clenched teeth:

“Tomorrow we go a-huntin’.”

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Chapter 5

OVER TIME, man can get used to everything, even to being hanged. Only the day before yesterday, the dried meat had tasted like rubber. But having spent the next evening on a self-induced intermittent fasting, I'd come to the conclusion it was actually quite decent. As was the beer. Even though it hadn't become any sweeter, at least I could drink it without shuddering. A bit sour, so what? It was still better than nothing.

I even didn't mind my rough straw bed anymore. Why should I? Plenty of fresh air, environmentally friendly bedding, and the sounds of nature all around me — some affluent tourists pay a good wad of money for this sort of ambiance. They call it an eco-friendly vacation, don't they? And here I'd gotten it virtually for free, if you didn't count a couple of clips around my ears — but even so, Will had dished them out completely free of charge.

He was early again, dark as a thundercloud which was apparently his natural state. He was holding yet another flatbread and some kind of berry tea (at least the shapeless pulp inside looked like it could have been berries once). As I ate, he told me more about today's hunting trip.

"There's a beast that recently came to live nearby. Looks a bit like a wolf. I found it strange he was a loner away from his pack. So I kept an eye on him just in case. You can't let a hungry animal live close to human dwellings. But as it turned out, it wasn't a wolf at all."

I very nearly choked on my food. "What was it, then?"

"A werewolf from Purgator. I found a wild goat he'd killed. It had a wolf's toothmarks on it, together with human ones."

"Why would a human being bite a wild goat?"

“You see, when they're shapeshifting they can’t control themselves anymore. They turn into wolves when they’re hungry. And once they’ve eaten their fill, they shapeshift back.”

“Wait a sec. D’you wanna say it’s actually a Player?”

“Well, who do you think it is? A commoner from Purgator wouldn’t have been able to teleport here. Gatekeepers just wouldn’t let it happen.”

“Sorry, could we please start all over again?” I begged. “I just can’t work it out.”

“Can’t work what out? About the Gatekeepers?”

“Forget the Gatekeepers! About that shapeshifter Player!”

“Have you ever heard about the moons of Purgator?”

“I’ve seen them.”

“Very well. When the Red Moon is out, it can have a very powerful effect on the local beasts, making them so powerful they even occasionally attack Players. Not often, but it does happen. And if an animal like that wounds a Player, it can pass its powers on to him or her. Provided the said Player survives, of course. Normally it ends very badly for them.”

“How badly?”

“Well, a Player who becomes a half-antalope can be simply ripped apart by the indignant herd. Or a Player unlucky enough to be clawed by a gryphon might lose an arm and half the face. But some did survive. Not many, but that’s what causes all those shapeshifter stories. They never end well, though. As soon as a shapeshifter gets a taste for human blood, Guards make quick work of them.”

“But this one hasn’t killed anyone yet, has he?”

“That’s only a matter of time. The Red Moon had recently gone in, which was must have caused the infected Player to flee Purgator for Cesspit. He probably hoped to take shelter in a nice quiet world like ours. For the moment, he’s just scavenging, gradually losing control of his own mind. But once the full moon comes, he’ll lose the plot entirely. And I don’t want to wait until he does something stupid, drawing unwanted attention to this place.”

I nodded. I could see his logic. Animals tend to avoid the areas inhabited by large predators. This particular werewolf had messed up his timing, which was a horrendous mistake on his part.

Was I sorry for him? I focused, trying to listen to my gut feeling, but sensed nothing. I was a bit jittery in anticipation of the big hunt, that’s all.

“Look what I’ve got,” Will said, laying down onto the straw a Beretta and an eight-shot Remington 870. I’d used both the day before. I picked up the pistol and checked the clip, then studied the shotgun. Both were loaded.

“Magic can roughen him up a bit but not much. So here’re some real weapons for you. It’s not as if they’re any more effective but they might annoy him enough.”

“So how are we gonna kill him?”

“*You* are gonna kill him. With that crossbow of yours. Those bolts enhanced with necro magic are one hell of a weapon. It might work, you never know.”

“And what if it doesn’t?”

“Then I’m gonna tell Hunter that no one came to see me.”

It took me some time to realize he was joking. Very funny, haha. Wish I could appreciate the joke.

“And one more thing.”

Will proffered me his hand. Mechanically I shook it, confused.

You’ve been offered a test!

Test name: Hunt

Its successful completion will result in an increase of the respective levels of the following skills: Stealth, Shooting, Athletics, Acrobatics, Unarmored Combat.

Failure to pass it will result in a reduction of the respective levels of the following skills: Stealth, Shooting, Athletics, Acrobatics, Unarmored Combat.

It wasn’t as if I had a choice, anyway, because Will shook my hand a couple of times, then let go of it. He got to his feet, slapped his knees and headed back to the house. When he was already reaching for the door, he turned round.

“Whatcha sittin’ there for? Let’s go. It’s a good half an hour’s ride for your snapdrake.”

When my mount noticed me, he shook off his slumber and shuffled his feet impatiently as if seeing an old friend. I stroked the nape of his neck, suffering in silence as he tried to lick me all over just like a dog.

I also noticed a few other things. Will had removed the mount’s original one-seat saddle, replacing it with a two-seater with an extra set of straps. Also, I saw some small white bones in the feeding tub in front of him which looked as if they’d been recently picked clean.

“What’s this?” I asked, pointing at the sad remains.

“That’s a hare I got when we were out yesterday. Your hobby horse has one hell of an appetite.”

“Isn’t he vegetarian?”

That question managed to do what no one could have boasted in the last two hundred years: it made Will laugh. Still chuckling, he pulled the “horse’s” lips to show me his teeth.

Which was my answer. No vegetarian could have canines that big. They wouldn’t know what to do with them.

My hand on the snapdrake’s neck sort of faltered. You never knew what could get into the creature’s head. One nip from those gorgeous teeth would be enough to reduce me to a crippled beggar in a subway crossing.

“Jump on,” Will said, effortlessly climbing into the front saddle despite his 300-pound bulk.

Admittedly, I felt sorry for the poor animal. It can’t be fun carrying two Korls who aren’t known for their petite frames. Still, the powerful beast didn’t even flinch. Will waited for me to strap myself to him, and off we went.

I really didn’t like being in the passenger seat. At every swerve, momentum threw you from side to side. Also, Will must have been one of those macho types who eschewed things like daily shower and aftershave. He was probably a good and extremely rare catch for a woman who could appreciate this kind of male brutality — but I wasn’t one, unfortunately, and my nose wasn’t even blocked. So I was forced to constantly turn my head this way and that just to avoid taking in nosefuls of Will’s body odor.

The road itself wasn’t much to talk about, simply because there wasn’t any road at all really. First the snapdrake trotted across the snowed-

in forest, after which he climbed a tall hill. Will made a quick break there, to allow him — and admittedly me too — to catch our respective breaths; then we set off again across the fields enshrouded in snow.

I could never understand how claustrophobic passengers managed to survive on transatlantic flights. Still, even their ordeals probably weren't a patch on mine. By the time we'd finally stopped, my backside felt like a flattened slab of rock. My breakfast flatbread was firmly stuck halfway down my throat, threatening to empty my stomach contents — digestive juices and all — onto the freshly driven snow. My head went round with all the effluvia so thick it reverberated in my temples. Still, I just about managed to unstrap myself and jump to the ground.

Struggling to suppress a groan, I took a couple of tentative steps. My legs refused to obey me; the left one was seized by a cramp. Will dismounted next to me, apparently not in a hurry to release the lathered snapdrake.

"Every werewolf has a cave," he explained. "They use it as a place to shapeshift. The guy we're talking about also has one; it's over there. I already checked it. There's a lot of hair and old animal pelts inside. I think he'll arrive closer to the evening. All werebeasts are driven by hunger. I should kill him before he shapeshifts, if I were you. Once he does, you'll have a much bigger job on your hands. I'll be back in the morning to collect you... or what's left of you."

Before I got the chance to tell him it wasn't the funniest of his jokes, he jumped on the snapdrake and galloped away without as much as saying goodbye.

Yeah right. The guy was a master of pep talks. I heaved a sigh and took a look around.

So what did we have here? One mountain, tick. Its slopes weren't too steep; they were even overgrown with trees which now stood predictably bare. I managed to make out the cave mouth between two large

boulders which looked like one big chunk of rock split in two. Not easy to notice at all. In front of it lay a vast expanse of untouched snow. The nearest wood's edge was about a hundred feet away. A little river lay frozen below; and beyond it a small village, judging by the barely noticeable whiffs of chimney smoke. That's probably where our werewolf would head off in search of any food.

I picked up a fir branch and started smoothing out the snow to cover up my tracks, backing away from the cave toward the wood's edge. He could probably still smell me but at least my presence wouldn't be so blatantly obvious.

Backing off, I finally reached the forest. To my pleasure, I saw that it was actually mixed, with plenty of deciduous trees as well as conifers. In summer, this place must have been sheer paradise. What a shame I was here on some stupid monkey business instead of enjoying the beauty around me.

Thus ruminating, I started climbing the densest tree I could find. When I was about fifteen feet from the ground, I perched myself on a branch. Here I was, good and ready. Come on, doggy, come to daddy.

I checked my phone. No signal. But at least according to the clock, I had shedfuls of time still. I wrapped my raincoat tighter around myself and tried to get some sleep to catch up on what I'd missed.

I awoke to the unpleasant feeling of my face being wet and cold. It took me some time to realize it was snowing. Great: I didn't have to worry about the beast noticing my tracks. I checked my phone — still too early — and dozed off again.

Soon I awoke again because my body was getting stiff. I changed my position, trying to get more comfortable. It was around five p.m.; the sky was getting dark. I shuddered. A bite to eat wouldn't go amiss.

Remembering the strips of dried meat, I tried to munch on it — but the first two bites made me so thirsty I sorely regretted it. I'd only made

matters worse.

The darkness fell fast. At least it had stopped snowing, otherwise I wouldn't be have been able to see jack. I wasn't sure about the moon even — the clouds were so thick they let in no moonlight at all. What if the werewolf wouldn't come tonight? Even the greatest predictions were known to miss the mark, let alone some guesswork offered by a sociopathic half-Korl.

I really wasn't looking forward to spending all night perched on this branch. Luckily, the weather wasn't that bad so I wasn't that cold, after all. But I wasn't an Indian Yogi to spend hours frozen in one position.

Should I climb down, maybe? And then what? I had no tent on me nor even a sleeping bag. I could head for the village, I suppose, but I could imagine what kind of furor I might create, arriving in the dead of night without speaking a word of their language. They might think I was a foreign spy, and that's the best-case scenario.

While I was thus pondering over my chances of a warm bed (which were admittedly slim), I heard the barely audible crunching of snow at a distance. At first, I couldn't even understand what was making it, so engrossed was I in my reverie of getting some comfort for the next twelve hours. But once the sound had finally registered, I even stopped breathing.

The footsteps were coming from aside, as if someone had skirted the mountain and was now heading toward me. That was some dog's leg he must have taken! At least that made it perfectly clear he can't have been one of the villagers.

I reached into my inventory for the Beretta. Just holding it made me feel better, knowing I had my ass covered. Eight 9 mm rounds were a power to be reckoned with. Had my father seen me now, he'd have probably had a heart attack!

In the meantime, the stranger — because by now I could tell that the footsteps were human — was approaching. He wasn't heading toward me, just walking in the same direction.

I strained my eyes, trying to see him, and finally made out a dark figure which moved erratically like a junkie in bad need of a fix. He staggered on unstable legs, his head hanging down. And he wasn't dressed for the weather at all. True, I too looked more like a metrosexual hipster than an Alpine skier but by the same token, this guy appeared too puny to boast any Korl blood like yours truly.

He seemed to be heading for the cave.

I gulped. Will had been dead right telling me to smoke the werewolf before he shapeshifted. I squinted, peering at the guy.

???

Contaminated

???

???

That was him. There was no doubt left in my mind. So why did the gun feel so heavy? The distance between us was a hundred feet max. Even a rookie couldn't miss at this kind of range. And my Shooting was already level 20-plus. What was wrong with me?

As if sensing my hesitation, the Player paused by the entrance to the cave. He turned round, peering either at me or at the village, I couldn't really tell. And just as luck would have it, at that very moment the moon emerged from a gap in the clouds.

I saw the Player's face. He was so young! Barely sixteen years old, if that. He looked sickly and gaunt, with drawn cheeks and black circles

around his eyes. The look in his eyes was so miserable that I just couldn’t do it.

As it normally happens, my moment of weakness cost me dearly. The guy just vanished. Not in the smoke-and-mirrors sense, of course: he had simply dived into the cave, so fast as if he’d never been there.

My gut feeling was screaming: “Please let Will be wrong! Let him be wrong!” Still, I understood perfectly well there was no chance of that happening. A single Player who’d wandered off the beaten track — plus my Insight had already told me he was “contaminated”. You didn’t have to be Will with his centuries’ wealth of experience to know that this guy was trouble.

And still I startled when I heard the bone-chilling howling that came from the cave’s depths. I removed the safety and chambered a round.

The howling changed to a soft growling which seemed to approach. A monstrous beast squeezed itself through the cave’s mouth.

My throat turned dry at the sight. I might be too used to the sight of our dogs — but this creature was twice the size of a St. Bernard!

The werewolf twitched his nose and stopped growling. He kept sniffing the cold air, gradually turning his head in my direction. His behavior didn’t betray any impatience — if anything, he was wary and alert, but now he completely ignored the far-off village huts. Somehow I doubted he was the local “good predator” cleansing the woods from weak or sickly critters. For that, he seemed too interested in one particular tree which served as a perch for a certain hapless hunter.

Quietly I put the gun away — it was little use in this situation, anyway — and reached for my crossbow. Had it been a normal-sized one like the one Will had, it might have been a challenge to handle, especially because reloading a crossbow takes quite a while. But my Baby didn’t have

that problem, did it? Shame to waste the ammo, though. I doubted I'd get a chance to go to the world of Smithery any time soon.

The werewolf approached slowly, his every move a show of unhurried confidence. I drew in one last breath and squeezed the big button located on top of the crossbow's pistol handle.

The weapon's short arms clicked open, drawing the bowstring tight. Now, how did you load this wretched thing?

Hearing the sound, the werewolf clung to the ground, growling anxiously, then went for the tree. In one giant leap, he landed on the same branch where I was. Had I not been holding for dear life, I'd have already dropped down.

I pointed the crossbow at him and squeezed the trigger. The mechanism jumped into action, allowing me to first draw and load, then loose off the bolt. Whew! It did work, after all.

The problem was, my "projectile weapon" was little more than a gentle tickle to him. I knew I'd hit him: I got him in his hind leg — which didn't seem to have inconvenienced him in the slightest. On the contrary, he charged again, using his own head as a battering ram.

That was one hell of an excellent try. The branch cracked under me. Admittedly, I wasn't really ready for this. My right hand was still clutching the crossbow; my left one clawed impotently at the tree bark as I lost balance.

My flight was neither long nor pleasant. I dropped onto my arm — and judging by the blinding bout of pain and the tell-telling crunching sound, I must have broken it. I growled louder than the werewolf himself whose amber eyes sparked above me.

I needed to make it! I had to make it!

The last thing I saw was his gruesome fangs sinking into my throat.

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Chapter 6

THE BIGGEST PROBLEM with this life is that we almost never get another chance. As a Russian rock band used to sing, “If you pull your hair out, you’ll never put it back in”[1]. Which is what makes our errors so costly. We really should always err on the side of caution and second-guess all the potential scenarios to make sure we don’t end up biting the dust, with mud on our face — and blood on our severed throat.

Which was why I was now praising all gods of all known religions, thanking them for not having been gullible enough to have changed my development branch after bearing witness to several deaths of other players. Because all of them — Morbian, Pull, even Destroyer — would have been lying on the ground now, each and every one of them, blood gushing out of their severed throats. But not me. Oh no, sir.

[∞]

I wondered if I should put the crossbow away into my inventory but I didn’t get the chance. The werewolf charged; the branch cracked; I dropped down, wriggling in the air and ultimately landing on my long-suffering tailbone. Not a very good try. It felt like someone snapped my spine into half, followed by a forced 100-meter sprint.

[∞]

This time I did a better job of it. Instead of trying to land on my two feet like stupid boys would have done completely ignoring their joints, I rolled head over heels, trying to redistribute the momentum. In my past life, I’d never done anything like that. I’d seen stunts like this in movies; I’d even read about it in some article on free running, but I’d never had the chance to perform it myself. My earlier leap over the rooftops back in the

community must have lent me the confidence I needed. Plus the situation sort of prompted it.

Your Acrobatics skill has increased to level 7.

Still, this wasn't the right moment to throw my hands in the air in anticipation of applause. It took me a split second to take stock of my situation.

The crossbow had landed a good dozen feet away from me. The werewolf was even closer, so retrieving my weapon wasn't an option. Without thinking straight, I pulled the Remington out of my inventory. How about this, mister?

I raised the Remington to my shoulder, took the safety catch off and fired. Because of the underpowered round, the recoil wasn't that strong — but my ears rang anyway. Missing him would have been difficult: the werewolf was a mere six feet away from me, as the next system message hurried to confirm:

Your Shooting skill has increased to level 22.

I reloaded in one sharp motion, watching the still-smoking spent shell drop onto the snow as I backed off. Why? Because the wretched werewolf showed no intention of dying! Yes, the shrapnel may have ripped his muzzle to shreds and the snow below him had turned a dirty crimson — but the bleeding seemed to have stopped, and his wounds seemed to be closing slowly.

Hey, that wasn't in the agreement!

I managed to take two or three steps before the werewolf came round and followed me, growling.

I don't think so! I fired again, less successfully this time, but still it stopped him for another couple of seconds.

As I reloaded, I turned my head and looked behind me, trying to access my survival chances. They weren't very good. Although I was retreating toward the village I doubted very much I'd ever make it there,

Growling, the werewolf kept following me, leaving a bloody trail in his wake. He was gradually falling behind though, so at the moment he was a good thirty feet away, but he was simply not in a hurry to attack, still recovering from his wound. He just kept walking, slightly limping but showing no intention of abandoning this new yummy prey.

Your Shooting skill has increased to level 23.

That was all well and good but unfortunately, this had been my seventh round. I had one slug left. I still had the Beretta, of course, but seeing as the shotgun was little use against him, I couldn't see how a pistol could help me.

One thing I didn't understand was why he wasn't trying to attack? He could have reached me in a couple of leaps — and that would have been the end of my short sweet life. Even if I had ten arms with a moon sword in each, Shiva-style, I was still weaker than this awesome animal. Was he afraid of the gun, maybe? Why should he: every time he received a new helping of buckshot, he just shook himself and continued tangoing me on the snow.

Had I had an extra hand, I would have made the sign of the cross. I loosed off my last round, shoved the shotgun back into the inventory and reached for the Beretta. First thing I did, I released the safety catch. My heart was pounding. I exhaled a few times, trying to calm down, and stopped, aiming the gun at the werewolf as I waited for him to come closer.

He moved strangely. Before, he'd been limping, but now he dragged his wounded hind leg, unable to move it at all. His other hind leg also began to malfunction, as if the beast was developing paralysis.

I waited for the right moment and shot him several times. I actually aimed for his eye but I only hit it on my fifth attempt.

Your Shooting skill has increased to level 24.

The werewolf emitted a blood-chilling roar that could have scared much braver people than yours truly. Still, I forced myself not to panic; instead, I threw the pistol back into my inventory to keep the shotgun company and reached for my close-combat weapons: the knife and the Katzbalger.

Now it was do or die.

The werewolf's head had long been reduced to a bloody mess. Some of the wounds were already closing. The tip of one of his ears had been shot off. He didn't look like a werewolf anymore: more like a one-eyed monster. That didn't mean he'd ceased being a life-threatening predator though. At least so I thought, quite prepared to spend my last two time rewinds on trying to wound him some more.

And then—

I realized he had no intention of attacking me. He was growling, shuffling his front legs as if stuck in quicksand. His backside lay flat on the ground: he was unable to get up. His hind legs had stopped working at all.

Gingerly I walked around him without taking my eyes off the bloody mask that used to be his muzzle and backed off toward the tree where I'd dropped my crossbow.

The werewolf didn't follow. He stayed in place, growling and shaking his head trying to turn round — but he couldn't, unable to move at all.

I reached the crossbow and picked it up, wiping off the snow stuck to its handle as I tried to catch my breath. I may have failed to hurt the

werewolf with some serious firearms but my Baby — or rather, the charmed bolt that came with it — hadn’t let me down.

I blew a sharp breath and headed back toward the werewolf.

He really didn’t want to die. He bared his teeth, snapping them in the air as he glared daggers at me and shuffled his front feet trying to get to me. As if! There was no way he could move his heavy bulk, especially because the lower half of his body now seemed to be paralyzed as well as his hind legs.

I stopped about six paces away from him, took an unhurried aim and squeezed the trigger. After a brief delay, the bolt ricocheted off the werewolf’s forehead.

Just my luck! I looked at the shattered remains of the bolt and all but screamed with disappointment. What a bastard. I had every bolt accounted for.

I stepped slightly aside and aimed again. This time I hit him in the chest. It seemed to have done the job.

Your Shooting skill has increased to level 25.

That was quick! Indeed, had it been a regular shooting practice, it would have taken me much longer to level up. But this time my very life was at a stake; besides, I’d used a variety of weapons already.

Still, this wasn’t the right moment to contemplate the finer points of leveling. Because the werewolf was dying.

He didn’t snap his teeth at me anymore. He dropped his head onto his front paws, still fixing me with his glare, and even tried to growl, weaker and weaker.

I missed the exact moment when something weird began to happen. The werewolf began to transform. His hair grew shorter, his tail shrank back into his body, his legs became long and thin. In less than a minute, I was staring at an emaciated young guy lying naked on the snow. One of my crossbow bolts was sticking out of his chest, the other out of his leg. The skin around the wounds was eerily dark as if someone had poured ink over them.

Feeling almost no fear, I walked over to him and gingerly touched one of the bolts. It felt as if lodged in a chunk of stone. Even the skin around it was rock-hard. The guy didn't groan when I touched him: he growled and tried to raise his arms but by then, he was too weak.

Very well. Time to put him out of his misery.

For some reason, all the sympathy I'd felt for the lone figure that had been walking through the night had by now evaporated. When you're attacked by a monster who is every bit your match, emotions become irrelevant. Your self-preservation instinct is all that matters. I may have been looking at a badly wounded young guy, but for me, he was still the werewolf, hungry and powerful. So I didn't prolong his agony.

I lifted his head by the hair and drew the knife's blade across his throat in one confident and almost unhesitant motion.

Your Short Blades skill has increased to level 17.

I only flinched once, when I'd heard gargling sounds coming out of his throat. Still, I forced myself to calm down and get a grip. He wasn't the first one and he certainly wouldn't be the last. I doubted I wouldn't be able to sleep at night: to all intents and purposes, I must have saved somebody else's life in the foreseeable future.

You've killed a Player who was hostile to you.

A change in development branch available: Stalker. In order to activate it, you need to select it as your new development branch within the next 24 hours.

You've gained the Healing of Minor Wounds spell.

You've taken the first step toward acquiring the Hunter ability.

You've helped a Commoner who is neutral to you.

+20 karma points. Current level: +2120. You gravitate to the Light Side.

You've helped a Commoner who is neutral to you...

My karma kept growing until it stopped at 2260. Which meant I'd somehow helped seven different people. Did that mean that the werewolf had kidnapped them and kept them under lock and key? Or trapped them? No idea. In any case, I started feeling like a superhero.

When I'd turned round, the body was gone, leaving a light layer of dust on the snow. I picked up the two bolts I'd fired. They weren't glowing the emerald green any more: they'd lost their properties. On the other hand, you could still shoot them, just for practice, so I put them away into my inventory.

This Player wasn't much to write home about. He hadn't had any Avatars nor interesting skills. Having said that, the latter was questionable: it was very likely that he'd simply had the same set of skills as I did. I ignored his development branch: my recent drop from the tree still smarted. But the skill might be worth looking into.

Healing of Minor Wounds (Regeneration). Allows you to heal minor damage to your skin tissue. Cost of use: 50 pt. mana.

Aha. Arts seemed to have had something similar during our first trip to Purgator. A very useful thing, no doubt about it.

I poked at the dust just in case. Nothing. Which was normal: the guy had been completely naked. Somehow I didn't think he'd have stuffed his granddad's silver watch where the sun didn't shine. Still, his clothes might contain something useful. Staggering, I headed for the cave.

I squeezed myself through the crack between the rocks and cast Light. The tunnel seemed to narrow as it headed deep under the mountain. After another twenty paces or so, the passage was getting too narrow for a human being. Still, I had no intention of going there.

The guy's clothes, torn and tattered, lay in a heap by the entrance. Regular commoner clothes, if you didn't mention his pants which were a total wreck. He didn't even have any weapons on him. The guy was a complete newbie; he must have been initiated only very recently — possibly, even after myself, by the very end of the Red Moon.

I checked the pockets of his warm coat which was ripped in half. A wallet containing his driving license and some bank cards; a bunch of keys, and a thin booklet.

The latter was very interesting. *The Animals of Purgator and Their Habitats: A Tourist's Guide (Abridged Edition)* by some John Rowley. The guy was definitely a newbie. He hadn't even known he could have put the book into his inventory.

I leafed through the booklet until I stopped at a dog-eared page.

Gray Wolves (known in Cesspit under the name of Canis lupus) are carnivorous mammals of the dog family. They can be encountered in the wild in the areas of...

I slammed the book shut. Oh yes, mister shapeshifter, you knew what you'd been doing. You'd consciously wanted to become a werewolf,

and you'd paid the price. Every action has a logical reaction, so I'm afraid I'd been bound to have become his Nemesis.

I walked back out in the open for a breather and munched on some snow to quench my thirst. My phone just wouldn't catch a signal; at the moment, it was just a gentrified alarm clock rather than a means of communication. The adrenalin rush had abated, replaced by wary apprehension. I just hoped these woods didn't harbor any more carnivorous mammals. One had been plenty for me.

I climbed back into the cave and fashioned some semblance of a bed out of the dead Player's clothes. I slumped down and tried to fall asleep but I was wide awake now. So I pulled out the booklet and continued to study the animals of Purgator using Light as a reading lamp.

Apparently, the animal world of Purgator indeed had a lot in common with that of planet Earth. Some animals were virtually identical, with very minor differences. Others had their own peculiar traits, like the manels that Jumping Jack had told me about: their leonine manes could become rock-hard, turning into a semblance of a shield. Yet others, such as the beholders and remaurases in the North, or the lecrottes and the like — were totally different again. I'd come across some of them in fantasy books (and how they'd ended up on their pages was a good question indeed) while others were truly unspeakable abominations. Never mind. Reading was a highly beneficial pastime — which I could confirm, looking at my Axiology skill which had just upped 2 points.

I hadn't even noticed as I fell asleep. Strangely enough, despite the cold, the empty stomach, hard bed and the spent air in the cave, I slept like a baby — until a certain rude and tactless half-Korl awoke me from my slumber.

"So how long are you going to laze about? Wake up, get out!"

I sat up, rubbing my eyes and yawning. Will motioned me to follow him, then went out. I staggered in his wake, which actually was worth it

because today apparently I had an omelet for breakfast. Okay, it may have been a bit on the hard side, a bit salty and offered to me by Will's not-exactly-clean hand, but my ideas of cleanliness had suffered a major rehaul in the last couple of days. I wolfed it down, chasing it down with the sour beer. In the meantime, Will listened to my tale of defeating the werewolf.

"You were lucky," he said. "You infected him with Guirris Fever. It does have this effect, temporarily paralyzing its victims, but the extent of it is pure luck. It might only affect a limb while in other cases it might affect the entire body as it was with him. Strange that necro magic didn't work."

"That's because unlike wolves and human beings who are living creatures, werewolves are cursed," I said. "It's as if life itself rejects them. That's why necro magic doesn't affect them much."

"How d'you know that?"

"I read about it a while ago."

Your Lying skill has increased to level 11.

If the truth were told, I hadn't exactly lied. I'd indeed read about it. Okay, maybe not a while ago but last night, to be precise.

Will shrugged. "Really? I didn't know. I used to put them to rest the good old way. Just chop their heads off, good enough. Never mind. Let's go."

Strangely enough, the return snapdrake ride behind Will's back didn't feel so nauseating anymore. Okay, so the guy smelled. But what was a bit of smell, after all? It was nothing like the stench coming from the huge jaws of a charging werewolf. *That* was unpleasant. And this was nothing.

When we'd arrived, Will made me clean the guns. Then he collected them, gave them a good check and proffered his hand. "Well, your training can be considered complete."

I returned his handshake. Line after line, a new message unfolded before my eyes.

Success! You've passed the test: Hunt

Your Stealth skill has increased to level 3.

Your Shooting skill has increased to level 26.

Your Acrobatics skill has increased to level 8.

Your Athletics skill has increased to level 12.

Your Unarmored Combat skill has increased to level 12.

"Whatcha starin' at? Gimme the crystal!"

'Eh? Oh yes, sorry," I handed Hunter's offering to him.

He turned it around in his hands, then disintegrated it. With a happy grin, he turned back to me,

"Whatcha waiting for? Your snapdrake's outside. Take him and piss off."

Talk about tough love. I'd sort of hoped that my successful test might take our reluctant relationship to a new level. In all honesty, I'd expected some friendly shoulder-slapping rather than the cold shoulder he'd given me. Apparently, I'd overestimated the benevolence of his nature.

Only when I'd already mounted my snapdrake, all strapped up and ready to depart for Bern, did Will emerge from the cave.

"One more thing. If ever you need help or whatever, don't even think of coming here. If I hear that you've opened your mouth about this

place, I'll kill those you told, and then I'll kill you. I could have forced you to swear an oath but in my opinion, any Player deserves being reasoned with. Their understanding is worth more than any amount of threats or empty promises. Safer that way. Our paths have crossed for a short while only to part again, for good this time. You understand that, don't you?"

I gave a curt nod to make it clear I understood it perfectly well. Then I heeled my snapdrake and left.

Later, replaying his words in my mind, I realized he'd been perfectly right. He didn't hate me or anything. Quite possibly, he'd even taken a certain liking to me. And he'd probably showed it the best he could. At the same time, he'd made himself perfectly clear without pussyfooting around. Shame not many people can be as straightforward as he'd been. That would have made life so much easier.

My trip back was uneventful, if you don't mention the chief driver's irate reaction to my belated arrival. He charged me an extra 16 grams for two extra days plus another 11 for a flyback ride to Lutum. Once there, I spent another 32 grams for using the Gates to get to Sorrow. So here I was now, back in my home town.

Shame there was no one to report my triumphant arrival to. My less-than-useless team wasn't in the Syndicate. Traug's shack was deserted too. Never mind. I could get home and call them from there.

I flagged a cab and headed for my humble abode.

You try and tell this to someone and see if they believe you. Only ten minutes earlier, I'd been riding a similar cab along the streets of Paris. And before that, I'd traveled by flyback from the city of Bern — which I'd reached on a snapdrake's back after I'd enjoyed the hospitality of a Korl hermit — after I'd spent a night in a cave having killed a werewolf, of all things!

And now here I was riding a taxi like a good citizen — okay, maybe a bit smelly and slightly worse for wear but all things considered, it had worked out just fine. Would I ever be able to get used to the Players' adventurous lifestyle and stop marveling at all the amazing things around me?

I wish! The moment I got out of the cab, I saw Lydia who beelined for me, pushing a stroller.

"Sergei! Sergei, wait! I need you to help me!"

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Chapter 7

THEY SAY THAT an Englishman's home is his castle, but it probably applies to all of us. Home is the only place where you can feel safe and let your hair down. You can walk around in your undies, pick your nose and ignore starched tablecloths and fish forks. In other words, you can finally reduce yourself to the happy good-natured Neanderthal you secretly are. And the truth is, sometimes you really need to.

The problem was, Lydia seemed bent on not letting me reach my proverbial castle. She was so excited at seeing me — negatively so — that she was all but frothing at her mouth. Had she been participating in a stroller race, she would have won it, that's for sure.

"Sergei, I've been looking for you for two days already!"

"I was away on business, was I?"

"Take this. You need to sign this," with a flourish of a circus magician, she reached into her purse and produced some paperwork.

"What is it?"

"That's the tenants' petition to the managing company telling them to call the exterminators. The rats are getting out of hand! We've all signed it already. You're the last one left."

I bet they had. When Lydia got something into that head of hers, she could force a totaled truck back on the road. She just seemed to have this curious trait: it was much easier to just agree with her than to argue your point.

But still, I needed more information. Especially knowing what I knew about my first encounter with Bumpkin. “Rats, which rats? Did we have any?”

“I saw one! It was that big,” Lydia spread her arms so wide that it probably owed more to her imagination that to the real state of affairs. No rat can be the size of Godzilla, because that would have raised the legitimate question of how on earth Lydia had survived the encounter.

“I was in my room putting little Lera to sleep. I put her down in her crib and went back to the kitchen. And you won’t believe what I saw there!”

As it turned out, the “rat” had been busy rummaging through one of Lydia’s kitchen cupboards. At seeing her, it darted out into the hallway and disappeared without a trace. Lydia had no idea where it could have gone: she’d checked all the pipes and other potential creepholes but found nowhere the “vermin” could have escaped through.

“I was lucky it didn’t get the chance to get to the food!”

Without saying a word, I signed the petition, realizing the utter futility of the whole “extermination” hoo-hah. Because I’d just had this insight — and I’m not talking about my freshly-acquired skill but of the natural deeply rooted gut feeling — which had already identified the rat in question. The only thing was, why on earth would Bumpkin have had to pay my neighbors a visit?

Back home, I had a surprise visitor, namely Arts busy making a new dent in my couch.

Seeing me, she hastily jumped up. “Where the hell have you been?”

“Switzerland. What the hell are *you* doing here?”

“What does it look like? I’m waiting for you.”

“Master!” A ball of hair descended upon me, clinging to my chest.

“And you, mister,” I said, easing him off, “have something to tell me. Why in God’s name did you have to go to the neighbors’?”

Bumpkin shrank, staring guiltily at the floor — basically, resuming his most frequent position in our conversations.

“Speak up, man.”

“I just wanted to bake a cake, you know. To celebrate your homecoming and all. And we didn’t have any vinegar, did we? We used to have a whole bottle — no idea what happened to it. So I just thought I’d pop over to the neighbors’ to borrow some. Thought they wouldn’t mind.”

“Well, apparently they did, very much so. You nearly gave Lydia a heart attack. So please, no more borrowing, repossessing or stealing of any kind. You cook with what’s available. If something’s missing, just tell me and I’ll go buy it for you. Understood?”

Bumpkin sniffled. “Yeah.”

“I’m off to take a shower now. You can lay the table in the meantime. I’m curious to see what kind of culinary masterpiece was worth hassling the maintenance company to come over for nothing. And you, young lady, had better have a good excuse too,” I grumbled, looking at Arts.

My castle? — more like a roadside inn! Okay, this fluffy hanger-on was actually quite tolerable — but what had made Arts think she could just come round whenever she wanted?

Never mind. It was time to lay down some law and order — but first, I needed a good wash.

Still, the moment I stepped under the hot jets, I very nearly groaned with delight. Sorry, Will my friend, I'd never understand you. Being a macho hermit was probably the coolest thing — but not in my book, I don't think.

I poured a generous helping of shower gel onto the sponge and lathered myself all over. Rinse and repeat. What a bliss! What can be better than a half-Korl? — only a half-Korl smelling of grapefruit.

I changed into some fresh clothes I'd providently taken with me into the bathroom (seeing as there were some female strangers of indeterminate age roaming my apartment) and came back to the real world. The one ruled by pain and cruelty — and presided by Bumpkin's cream cake sitting at the center of the table.

"Come on, tell me," I said, pouring out the tea while casting sideways glances at the cake. "Give me one good reason why my apartment looks more like a cheap hostel with every passing day."

"There's nothing to tell. We're waiting for you, that's all. You didn't answer the phone so I had to come round. Traug has found Clinger. He's apparently arrived at Chou."

"He's arrived at *me*?" I asked in confusion, pointing a thumb at my own chest.

"Not *at you*, stupid! At *Chou!* It's a town in Noggle. Apparently, he really is looking for mercenaries."

"And what about the other two? Our reluctant lovebirds?"

"Still at the Inn, drinking. Traug has nothing better to do. And Litius just keeps him company, I think. They basically moved over there. The innkeeper has a few rooms upstairs, so I think they're staying there now. They can't walk very far in the state they're in, anyway. If we go there now, they might still be relatively lucid at this time of day."

“Okay, we’ll do that. Has Julia been?”

“Eh, you know, it’s a bit complicated...”

I really didn’t like the way she’d said it. That’s how they normally inform you of your pet’s death. Or tell you that your millionaire uncle hadn’t mentioned you in his will. I set my tea mug down and gave her a long look.

“I came here because you asked me to. I told Bumpkin not to let anyone in. How could I know that your Julia is so quick off the mark? I just walked in, and there she was climbing the stairs already!”

A shiver ran down my spine. “And?”

“Nothing. She must have misinterpreted the whole thing. She didn’t cry but I could see her lips were quivering. She dropped the shopping on the floor — she’d bought some honey, lemons and some garlic — and just dashed back downstairs.”

“You didn’t go after her, did you?” I asked in a voice which wasn’t quite my own.

“I didn’t think about it. And when I did, I rushed downstairs but she was already gone.”

“Oh for crying out loud!”

I darted for my discharged smartphone and hurried to plug it into the charger. Come on, now! Charge!

Just to please, the phone wasn’t in a hurry to kick back on. Finally, the screen lit up, sporting the proud logo of some Chinese make. Unhurriedly the interface kicked in. Oh please!

The network icon came on. After a few agonizing seconds, I received several texts. My hands were shaking as I opened them. Five were from Arts; one more from Mom. I checked the messenger: nothing. Nothing from Julia.

That's a flippin' fiasco, bro.

When women scream and shout at you, expecting you to explain yourself to them, it means you still have a chance, however slim. But when they burn the bridges like this, the possibility of fixing what you broke hovers dangerously close to zero.

The old me might have sent her a tearful text, then spent the next few days sulking, feeling sorry for himself. But today, I had no intention of putting up with this stupid misunderstanding.

I dialed her number but she hung up on me after the first two beeps. Predictably so. I tried a couple more times. Same result.

In that case, I had to go all-in.

"Bumpkin, d'you think you could give my clothes a quick clean so they're not so sodden? It's a bit urgent, I'm afraid."

The air exploded in a rapid succession of popping sounds as he darted across the apartment. I heard water running in the bathroom while Bumpkin got busy with my raincoat at a speed which would have made Duracell Bunny proud. The rest of my clothes were of the normal human kind: a pair of jeans (which admittedly felt almost strange against my skin now), a sweater and a T-shirt.

I retrieved my still-damp raincoat from Bumpkin, gave it a shake and slid my feet into my magic boots. I just hoped I wouldn't have to travel between worlds this time round. A naked guy in a raincoat might look a bit suggestive, if you know what I mean.

‘Bumpkin, mind giving these other pants and sweater a good wash, please? Arts, I’d like you to go to the Inn now. I’ll see you guys there.”

“Yes, but that’s not what I wanted to tell you! The Horsemen-”

“Later. That can wait. Tell Traug to go easy on drink. I’m off.”

I’d called the cab while dressing, so it was already waiting for me downstairs. I slumped on the back seat and asked the driver to pop in at a supermarket first, promising him a good tip. Whether it was my Persuasion skill at work, or simply the tone of my voice, but he didn’t dare argue with me.

Jesus. What’s that for a life? It wasn’t even midday yet; I’d just arrived from the middle of nowhere, and here I was rushing off again putting out fires!

After another thirty minutes, I’d finally arrived at Julia’s place. I’d come fully prepared. My heart was pounding. I tipped the cabbie half my fare and climbed out of the car hugging a cake and a wrapped-up bottle. I paused in front the entrance looking up, trying to calculate her windows. Well. Fingers crossed!

I dialed the wrong apartment number, prudently aware of the fact I might not be welcome. If I just turned up on her doorstep, I might last a bit longer before she kicked me out.

‘Who’s that?” a female voice asked.

“Gas company. Taking the readings.”

I purposefully avoided all those “Hi’s” and “How d’you do’s”. Gas people never bother with such niceties; crooks posing as gas people do. All I really needed was to get in. That’s when the real problems would only just start.

“Oh great,” the voice replied. “I was just about to call you myself. I’ve got a gas ring that’s leaking gas.”

Your Lying skill has increased to level 12.

Open sesame. Easy peasy. Shame about the lady though. She’d probably stay at home now, waiting for me to arrive. And what if she really had a gas leak?

I pulled out the phone and dialed a number.

“Emergency helpline, state your problem, please?”

“I think I can smell gas coming from a neighbor’s apartment.”

“What’s the address, please?”

Feeling like an A-student at an open lesson, I painstakingly dictated the address, giving her the apartment number I’d dialed earlier.

“State your name, please?”

That’s when my discharged phone finally gave up the ghost. I just hoped that the lady had been right and the emergency van wouldn’t turn up for nothing.

You’ve helped a Commoner who is neutral to you.

+20 karma points. Current level: +2280. You gravitate to the Light Side.

Aha, so the lady hadn’t been paranoid, after all. So? Who’s the Mr. Good Deed of the Month? Not a day goes past without rescuing a kitten from a tree.

But now I had to focus. I had a really serious feat to perform.

I walked up the stairs and stopped by the right door. Took a deep breath. Tried to lift the cake so that it could be seen through the peephole. Then I pressed the bell.

I heard the shuffling of house shoes inside. The peephole turned dark.

“Who is it?” a female voice asked, slightly anxious.

“Excuse me, is Julia in?”

The lock turned twice. The door opened.

A pleasant plump woman of about fifty years old was looking at me. Her apron and her right cheek were covered in flour, her hair put away under a headscarf. Who was it that said “"If you want to know what your wife will look like when she’s older, look at her mother”? Not a truer word said in jest.

“Hi, how are you?” I said.

“Hi,” she said, slightly taken aback.

“Vera, who is it?” another voice came.

In a few moments, I was looking at Julia’s father. He was rather slight, with lots of gray in his cropped hair. He gave me a frowned look and turned to his wife.

“He’s here to see Julie,” she explained.

You’d think the world had just come crashing over their ears. Or that they were looking at a one-legged talking dog quoting Nietzsche.

“How do you do, Sir. My name’s Sergei. I’m Julia’s friend. This is for you,” I said, finally getting rid of the cake and the champagne.

It seemed to have done the trick, bringing them out of their stupor. The father invited me in while the mother rushed over to the kitchen to unwrap the presents.

“Julie, there’s someone to see you!” he shouted without taking his watchful stare off me.

“Who is it?” a voice came from a far room.

“May I?” I asked.

He nodded, and I headed in the direction of the voice.

Their apartment was quite modest: a standard two-bedroom with a lounge in the middle. This was a traditional post-Soviet setup: a wall unit replete with family pictures and crystalware; a threadbare couch; an old Oriental rug which was probably Julia’s grandmother’s family heirloom. Still, I could sense no poverty or desperation often associated with this kind of décor. These people may have been poor but they were proud.

The door stood ajar. I walked over and gently tapped on it. “Hi.”

Julia was sitting at a desk with her back to me, facing a computer screen. The desk was littered with framed pictures, manila files, a paraphernalia of office supplies and an enormous laser printer.

For a moment, I could almost see that thing flying crashing at my head. And if the truth were known, I had every reason to be alarmed.

Her face betrayed such a tornado of emotions that I was worried she might try and jump out the window. She might have actually done it, had they lived on a lower floor. Still, she somehow managed to get a grip.

“What do you want?” she asked through clenched teeth.

The wave of cold in her voice made me flinch. She was dead serious. I needed every bit of Persuasion I could muster.

“Jul, can I have five minutes of your time, please? I’m here anyway, so you might just as well listen to me. If you don’t want to see me after that, I won’t insist.”

She turned to face me. The steel glint in her eyes hadn’t abated. “Okay. Speak up.”

That’s where I completely lost it. My well-rehearsed story about her bumping into a workmate who’d come round to see me had crumbled like dry plaster. She just wouldn’t believe it. I wouldn’t have, either. She’d probably hurl one of those picture frames at me — and that’s the best-case scenario.

So my tongue seemed to have taken on a life of its own. “If you’re so jealous of my sister, what’s it gonna be like next? Are you gonna be jealous of every lamppost?”

“Which sister?” Julia asked, apparently getting sidetracked.

“Lily. My big sister. I told you, don’t you remember? She came to check up on me.”

Julia bit her lip. “Your sister. Really?”

The look in her eyes made me hate myself. “Of course,” I lied.

Your Lying skill has increased to level 13.

She jumped up and flung her arms around my neck. “I’m so sorry! I was so worried about you! Why didn’t you call me?”

“I was sick in bed with high fever. I couldn’t think straight. My sister decided not to tell me that you came round. The moment she told me, I called you. Then I decided to come and see you.”

“I’m sorry,” she clung closer to me. “I’m so stupid.”

“No, you’re not.”

I don’t think I’ve ever hated myself more than I did then. I wished the earth could swallow me whole.

I hadn’t meant to lie to her! Then all of a sudden I’d changed my mind. What the hell had just happened?

“I promise I won’t do it again,” she said.

“Okay. Next time, we’ll just speak instead of rushing off, agreed?”

Julia wiped away the tears welling in her eyes and nodded. She had just laid her head on my shoulder, visibly calming down, when she recoiled again. “Does that mean you’ve met my parents?”

“Well, not exactly *met* met. But I did give them my name though.”

She shook her head in disapproval. “This isn’t how I wanted it to happen. Never mind. Can’t be helped now. Let’s go see them.”

We walked out of her room and headed for the kitchen.

The silence was such that you could have heard a mosquito buzzing, had it not been winter now. The kitchen table had been wiped clean — apparently, it had just been used to roll out the dough which was now sitting in a steel bowl. The TV was muted. Julia’s father looked at us, all tense — the way he looked, you’d think he expected us to announce that his daughter was pregnant, at the very least. Her mother looked at a loss, too.

“Mom, Dad, this is my Sergei.”

“Hi again, ma’am. Sir.”

Julia’s father proffered his hand. “Call me Konstantin.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“Don’t ‘sir’ me. Uncle Kostya’s good enough.”

“No it’s not!” his wife protested. “It’s bad enough that those young shirks at work call you so! I’m Vera,” she hurried to add. “Just Vera, no ‘ma’am’.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Well, here’s to welcome company, then,” Uncle Kostya reached for the champagne bottle.

“Kostya, you’re not drinking now, surely?” his wife said. “Not before a night shift! He’s a subway tunneler,” she explained to me.

“And you, Sergei? What do you do?” Julia’s father jumped at his chance.

“I’m a fiber optics shipping agent. We deliver fiberglass cables all over the area,” I said, unwilling to expand on my old story.

“What kind of job is that?”

While I described my hi-tech profession to my future father-in-law in every embellished detail, Aunt Vera put the kettle on. Julia reached into the fridge for some meat and cheese and was busy making sandwiches, casting me occasional glances and smiling under her breath.

My white lie didn’t seem so bad now, after all. It was true that I had no idea how to swap Arts for the real Lily now — because Julia was bound to meet my own parents one day. It suddenly dawned on me that this thing between us was getting serious.

“There, look! I told you that their libertarian games would end badly! Discipline is what they need!” Uncle Kostya perked up, pointing at the TV.

No matter how unwilling I was, I was obliged to turn round.

Jesus. This felt like a déjà vu. Crumbled ruins; the bright police tape; groups of Players in black masks roaming around.

“This is what happens when you allow people to do what the hell they want!”

“What’s this, a terrorist attack?” I asked, struggling to make out the grains of truth in the flood of his brainwashed diatribe.

“The fourth one in two days! Today has been announced a day of mourning in Italy.”

“What city is it?” I asked in a suddenly weak voice.

“D'you live under a rock or something? Do you watch television?”

“Dad, he’s been sick for the last few days,” Julia hurried to my defense.

“Oh yeah, okay then. Still, surely you can recognize the Colosseum? This is Rome.”

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Chapter 8

WHO WAS IT WHO SAID that marriages are made in heaven? Never mind the previous four have ended in some hearty dish smashing and calling the cops. This proverbial heaven must have some sick sense of humor.

Having said that, Julia's family looked perfectly normal in this respect. Her father was a classical breadwinner and the epitome of a handyman around the house, while her mother presided over the family hearth which was always aglow, ready to accept a new batch of homemade cookies. That said, Uncle Kostya seemed to obey his wife indiscriminately, with the exception of truly momentous decisions such as voting for President, deciding which path Russia should take, and the vote of nonconfidence regarding his upper neighbor who'd "forgotten" to return the borrowed drill. All less significant matters — such as shopping, banking, and the family curfew time — were delegated to Auntie Vera's able hands.

"Why, Sergei, are you leaving already? The dough is almost ready. If you wait half an hour, I'll bake some potato cakes."

"Sorry, but I really should be going, I'm afraid. They expect me at the office. They don't like people being sick. The less you work, the less money you make."

"You can't make all the money in the world," my potential father-in-law wisely pointed out. "The other day, my boss called me in on my day off. And I just told him where he could stuff it. I know my labor code."

"Sure you do," Auntie Vera said grimly. "Never mind he stripped you of this month's bonus. Sergei's right. Jobs aren't easy to come by these days."

After an extended ceremony of goodbyes and promises that I'd be back soon to visit them properly, they finally released me. Julia gave me a demure peck on the cheek, apparently unwilling to affront her father.

I left the building and slumped onto a chilly bench by the front door, staring at the gas workers' van. Jesus. This called for something stronger than a beer. I wasn't really made for these kinds of ordeals.

I pulled out the phone, about to call a cab, and cussed impotently. Dammit! It was about as much use at the moment as an electric teapot to a cannibal tribe. I'd have to walk all the way to the bus stop now just to get home. Which number bus did I need from here, anyway? Even that I couldn't find out without my phone.

It was a good job I wasn't a regular common guy, was I? Me, I had all the right tools. I opened my interface map and looked for the Inn. Once I'd highlighted it, I immediately sensed a light breeze which seemed to guide me on my way. Excellent. I was all set to go.

I was about to close the map when I noticed another marker. Its purple color set it apart from all the rest. It was near the city center, on the other side of the bridge leading to the Community. The tag said: *"Residence of the Seers"*.

Aha. Curiouser and curiouser.

I zoomed out. Now I could see that the map was absolutely covered in purple dots. Moscow, St. Petersburg, Novosibirsk, Ufa, Kazan, and that's only in Russia. What about the rest of the world? Stockholm, Paris, Lisbon...

Oh. My heart froze in my chest. The one in Rome was circled in red with a note which said, *"Destroyed"*.

It was simple, wasn't it? The rank that the Seers' Grand Master had bestowed on me allowed me to see their respective residences. Which was

good news, I suppose. The bad news was, one of them was already destroyed — by the Horsemen, by the looks of it, because the place was only a stone’s throw away from the sarcophagi where they'd been kept asleep for millennia.

Which meant a few last-minute changes to my itinerary. My friends could wait. Okay, so Traug would have to drink a few more beers, big deal. I needed answers, and I needed them now.

I changed my destination point on the map and started walking, guided by my Map Making skill. When I’d finally made it to the bus stop and was about to enquire about the number I needed, the system offered a much-appreciated prompt, highlighting the number on one of the many minibuses crowding the bus lane.

After a brief ten-minute ride, I got off on a quiet street lined with old two- and three-story graybrick houses. A subway bridge at one end and a few lone passersby stumbling past — you couldn’t imagine a sleepy place like this could exist just next to a busy thoroughfare.

In any case, I was too pressed for time to enjoy the scenery. The little “breeze” kept pushing me in the back, urging me toward a crumbling two-story house which seemed to have been deserted for a long time.

In order to get in, I first had to negotiate a heavy wrought-iron gate with a small door in it. The door was locked. I tapped on the painted ironwork a few times and was already considering climbing over the gate when the rusty hinges creaked.

A disheveled red-headed guy peeked out of the tiny doorway, staring at me. Its owner was apparently a certain ***Autogenic***. Who also was — surprise — a Seer.

The stranger looked me over, scratched his freckled nose and opened the door wider. “Hello, Seers’ Guest. How can I help you?”

He’d recognized me. Big sigh of relief. I’d lost the Seers’ red entry card, hadn’t I? Having said that, how could he possibly help me?

This was the million-dollar question. I needed information — but that didn’t mean I could walk around asking strange Players to tell me everything they knew, preferably writing the main points down for my convenience.

“Could I speak to the Magister, please? Or the Grand Master?”

Carrottop smiled. “They don’t come here too often, I’m afraid. Having said that, I think they’re about to—”

He promptly shut up, realizing he’d said too much. The look in his shifty eyes clearly betrayed the fact that now he’d be obliged to kill me, just to avoid whatever punishment they meted out here for those who’d failed to keep their tongues in check.

“And who’s in charge, then?” I hurried to appease him before he’d had a chance to do anything stupid. A good witness is a dead witness, if you know what I mean.

“Banneret Arthan.”

“Arthan?” I exclaimed as if the guy in question was my best friend. “The one with the lightsaber? He’s a Master, isn’t he?”

“That’s right. The Banneret is one of the few Players who’d achieved absolute mastery with Long Blades.”

“Can I see him, please?”

Fear stirred inside me. What if he just sent me packing with some flowery excuse?

Instead, carrottop gave me a happy nod and swung the door open. “Sure. You’re our Guest, after all.”

The way he’d said it was different from how a commoner would. He uttered it as if it were some sort of royalty title, imbuing the word which a much deeper meaning. For some reason, I kept hearing Uncle Denis’ voice in my head saying, *“Be my guest but make sure you don’t overstay your welcome.”*

Still, I stepped into the little closed courtyard. You could tell they’d only moved in here recently. The snow had been shoveled, revealing patches of bare tarmac, but I could see a whole heap of scrap metal piled up in a corner, waiting for someone to take care of it. The walls of the house itself were old and flaky, the window frames crumbling, one of the glass panes replaced with a sheet of chipboard.

“Over here,” carrottop said, climbing the creaky porch. “I’m Hiss, by the way.”

“Is that your name?” I asked in surprise.

“No, not really. It’s just that whenever I activate my development branch, it makes this kind of sound. A bit like a gas hose leaking. *S-s-s-s,*” he tried to impersonate it. “So that’s what they all started calling me, Hiss. I don’t mind... it’s okay, Achelous,” he added, addressing a burly bullman who guarded the door from the inside. “He’s with me.”

The bullman immediately lost all interest in us and stepped aside, leaving me slightly puzzled. Achelous, really? The one from Greek mythology? Or did he receive his moniker because he looked like him? Honestly, the guy was monstrous enough to go by the name of Minotaur.

All those musings over an accidental Player’s identity had very nearly left me alone in the hall. I hurried to catch up with Hiss.

The house was rather curious. It was big; apparently freshly — albeit rather sloppily — renovated. The furniture was of the expensive antique kind, but some rooms still stood echoingly empty. In some of the others, I glimpsed signs of a hasty removal job, like a lone couch and a couple of easy chairs next to some paintings leaning against the wall. It was as if whoever had moved out had forgotten or left some of their furnishings behind.

“Wait a sec,” Hiss stopped me when we paused next to the small door of the farthest room. He reached for the door handle. “You’d better stay outside. Banneret, may I? We’ve got a Guest...”

In some half a minute, he reappeared with Banneret Arthan in tow.

“You can go now,” the Banneret gave him a pat on the shoulder. Once the guy left, he turned to me. “Greetings, Sergei. I have to admit I’ve been expecting you. Please accept my deep gratitude for saving the Grand Master’s life. I’ve no idea what we’d have done now had we lost him. Follow me,” he motioned me to enter.

I entered his office — or so I initially thought, although the place was more like a storeroom full of old junk. A few disassembled bentwood chairs in need of upholstering; an old stool; a tube of glue and a dusty window.

The Banneret sat down, picked up the glue and continued working on a chair. “The Magister asked us to get the place ready but we don’t have many workers available. So I need to attend to certain matters personally.”

“Why do you need this place, anyway? I thought you used to rent a house in the Community, didn’t you?”

“Because you can’t cast spells on Community buildings. They have magic restrictions in place. And we were only allowed to have the maximum of five of our own guards. Which wasn’t a very good

arrangement for us. We've lost two residences recently. One in Prague and the other in-"

"In Rome."

"That's right."

"D'you think you could tell me what happened there?"

Banneret Arthan heaved a sigh and even set his handiwork aside. He screwed the top back onto the glue tube but instead of setting it aside, he continued fiddling with it.

"The Grand Master asked us to tell you everything you'd like to know, to the extent possible. So. In the last two days, we've had seventeen Seers killed in the whole of Cesspit. And they didn't die in the course of their duties. Nor by accident. They all died in their own homes."

"Who is it that's killing them? The Horsemen?"

He gave me a somber look and shook his head. "The Horsemen have been asleep for too long. They wouldn't know where to look for them. I don't think they even know that Seers exist! In their days, there were no Orders around, only a few stronger Players who united others around themselves."

"And you... were you around then?"

"Oh no. I was born much later. I used to roam the world; for a while, I even ruled a great many strong valorous warriors. Still, eventually our kingdom fell too. Even though... but that's irrelevant, anyway. So you shouldn't be thinking that the Horsemen are just four guys from the legend."

"Only three now," I reminded him.

“That’s right. Now they’re three. But they’ve always been surrounded by lots of other Players — those who played with ideas of wealth, influence and power, if you’ll excuse the pun. And once the Horsemen had been neutralized, those other Players had to adapt to new conditions. Some left this world for good. Others lay low, trying to blend in with the changing universe. But not all of them were happy to embrace it. So now that the Horsemen have awoken, their minions have crawled out of the woodwork too.”

“But why did they attack the Community? Was it revenge?”

“Not really. It’s just that everybody wants to own the most powerful weapon in the world.”

“But the sword is destroyed.”

“That’s not what I mean,” Banneret Arthan picked up the glue, resuming his work on the chair. “The greatest weapon — the absolute weapon in man’s eyes — is information. And that’s exactly what the Horsemen need. And who do you think excel at collecting and processing information?”

“The Seers.”

“And that’s probably what those coyotes must have said to their awoken masters. The Magister managed to predict their attack. And we even managed to evacuate some of the Seers.”

“Some but not all?”

“Not really. We had some very powerful Players among those they’d taken: four bannerets and two adjuncts. And I don’t think the Horsemen granted them an easy death. Most likely, they’d first tortured everything they needed to know out of them.”

“So what’s gonna happen now?”

“Think for yourself. What would you do if you woke up from a century-long sleep only to discover there’s a certain Player who’s got the avatars of Savior, Destroyer *and* Conqueror? Or if someone told you that there’s this freshly-initiated Player who managed to kill your ex-comrade — the one who’d betrayed you? What would you do if you found out they’re one and the same person?”

“Dunno.”

“At the very least, you’d like to take a look at him. And ideally, you would like to—” he drew a sharp thumbnail across his throat. “Three Avatars — and now there’re three Horsemen left, too. Don’t you think it’s lucky for them?”

“A killer can only claim one Avatar,” I said.

“That’s right. But nobody says there can’t be three killers. Or do you think the Horsemen wouldn’t have found a loophole in the rules in all those millennia they’ve been around?”

Now it dawned on me. “So that’s why you’re here. That’s what this Residence is for. You know where the Horsemen will strike next.”

“Exactly. We know they’re zeroing in on you. They can’t travel by Gates because we control all the approaches to them. Which takes a lot of effort and manpower, and even so they’ve already tried to storm the Gates twice. What makes it even worse, a lot of our people are now tied up carrying out a mission for the Grand Master. A very important one, too. As soon as their charge is safely out of the danger zone, we can finally regroup.”

“What kind of charge are you talking about?”

“You are indeed our Guest. On orders from the Grand Master, we’re obliged to divulge any information pertinent to your interests. But this,

please allow the Order to take care of this matter."

'Okay, okay. You don't have to tell me. In other words, all we can do is wait until the Horsemen get here?"

"The Grand Master and all the Magisters are now busy looking at all potential scenarios. We'd rather it happens the way you've just said because that would allow us to save a great many lives. And not just that. The battle scenario would allow us to monitor the initiation of new Players. Plus — when you know where a predator is heading, it allows you to set up a lot of cunning traps in his path."

"But how about other people? I mean, Commoners? What's gonna happen to those who happen to be in the Horsemen's way?"

"They'll die, I'm afraid. Similar to those who're already dead in Naples and Rome. Or the millions and millions of those who perished in world wars every time the Horsemen started their power games. You didn't expect things to have changed since, did you?"

"But... but this is..."

"Wrong? Unfair?" an unkind smirk darkened his face as he screwed the top back on the glue tube. He set it aside and gave me a long look. I didn't like what I saw in it. "Let me guess. You're blaming yourself for what happened in Naples, aren't you? You were the one who killed Morbian, so now you're beating yourself up because you think it's sort of your fault the seal was broken?"

I choked on a lump in my throat. I had nothing to say to that.

It was a good job he wasn't waiting for an answer. He just went on:

"Which basically means that the blood of several hundred people is on your hands. Am I correct?"

I felt a tickling in my nose. My eyes filled with tears. Did he really have to mention that?

“Five hundred and four dead, to be precise,” he went on. “That’s only to date. You want to say that you killed each and every one of them?”

I cleared my throat to hide what I was feeling.

“Luckily, it doesn’t quite work that way,” the Banneret went on. Mind telling me how many karma points you lost for those people’s deaths? Well, I’m gonna tell you. It’s zero. Makes one wonder, eh? Is it the father’s fault if his son became a rapist? Not really. Still, the father will have to live with it for the rest of his life. It’s up to him whether to punish his son or forgive him. Which is exactly what Karma is about.”

“So what do I do now?”

“Whatever you want. You can throw in the towel. You shouldn’t be thinking that the fate of all Cesspit is resting entirely on your shoulders. This world has plenty of people capable of defending it. Alternatively, you can indeed stand up against the Horsemen. But even so no one’s gonna call you a hero. Because it’s your decision. Whether it’s the right one or not is irrelevant. It’s entirely up to you.”

“And if I throw in the towel, what would all the others say?”

“All the others who? A bunch of Players whose names you don’t even know?”

“Well, I mean Hunter... and my friends...”

“Hunter is wise enough to see all the underlying reasons behind Players’ decisions. Trust me, he threw in the towel enough times. As for your friends... true friends would always understand. And the opinion of all others shouldn’t interest you.”

“I’m not a coward. I’m not afraid of the Horsemen. It’s just that I can’t think straight right now. Everybody seems to be rushing around. Everybody seems to have a goal. And I just can’t focus.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being a coward. Cowards live longer. They start families and raise children. Heroes die young. Often unsung.”

“Aha! Now I know! You’re trying to trick me, right? I don’t think a knight — or a banneret, whatever they call you — would ever say that cowardice is a good thing.”

He gave me a sly grin. “The most important thing in life is not to try to please anyone. You should always stay true to yourself, whatever you are.”

He startled, as if he’d just heard a loud noise. His eyebrows shot up in surprise, his eyes acquiring a harsh determined expression. He’d leapt to his feet before the door swung open.

This time, there was no delicate knocking, the door just flew open so hard that its handle banged against the wall. I caught the rebounding door just in time, preventing it from closing.

Hiss stood in the doorway, disheveled as if he’d had to battle his way through. In one hand, he was holding a large shield depicting some magical beast; a longsword dangled from his belt.

“Where?” the Banneret snapped.

“Outside. Right in front of the gates.”

“How many?”

“Only one.”

“Everybody stay put! I’ll take care of it,” the Banneret dashed out past us.

Hiss was about to follow when I grabbed him by the shoulder. “What’s going on?”

“We’re... we’re...” he gasped, trying to catch his breath, “we’re under attack!”

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Chapter 9

AS THE WISE AND WORLDLY philosopher Lucretius once said, “How comforting, when in stormy seas the winds whip up the waves, to watch from the shore the struggles of others”.

My thoughts entirely. Stock up on beer, pop some popcorn, then just lounge in a recliner, smugly watching somebody else’s war.

Yeah, dream on. The truth was, I was standing at the center of a circle surrounded by eleven Seers including Banneret Arthan, watching through the window as some mage was dousing the house with something that looked like red-hot lava fountaining right out of his hands. A truly fascinating sight it was.

“He can try all he wants, there’s no way he can bring the shield down,” Hiss explained to me in a whisper. “It was Adjunct Protec himself who cast it on the house.”

“He can’t, no,” the Banneret replied despite Hiss’ best efforts not to be heard. “That stuff won’t even scratch a window. But — it might draw unwanted attention to this place. Which is considerably worse.”

“I can deal with him, no problem,” the bullman replied.

“So can I,” said a young guy with golden hair. “Is he really thinking he’s an Elf or something?”

“Leave it to me,” the Banneret snapped.

He drew a broadsword with a deep blood groove and a long hilt. Its blade was covered in a barely discernible runic script, which lent it a truly magic look — nothing like my shabby old Gramr.

The Banneret took a two-handed hold on the hilt. The sword began to heat up, the orange hue of its blade gradually rising to a flame-engulfed crimson. Now the Banneret appeared to be holding fire itself in his hands, the blade's shape the only reminder of its nature. The flames may have been tamed but their rage was still rampant.

The Banneret dashed out the door. All of the Seers — and admittedly yours truly too — clung to the windows like curious middle-graders watching a fight in the school yard. Admittedly, I got one of the best seats, in a corner between two windows, offering me a double view of the porch and the street itself. That allowed me to watch the unfolding combat in widescreen, so to say.

Banneret Arthan seemed to float rather than run. I got the impression that he only had to kick off slightly harder in order to take to the sky. His every movement betrayed confidence and effortless ease. This is how true professionals move once they'd practiced a certain maneuver hundreds of times until it became their second nature.

He literally flew over the gate. Not vaulted over it heavily like a 200-pound man would — no, he kicked off and arched his back, soaring through the air like a speck of fluff.

The mage promptly switched over to this new target. He was fast at casting: I got the impression he did it professionally. He cast a regular fireball which grew bigger as it shot through the air, missing the Arthan by a hair. Or rather, the Banneret arched his back like a cat until his shoulder blades almost touched the tarmac — all that while staying on his feet.

The fireball slammed into the closed gate which was probably charmed against damage too, otherwise it would have never withstood the blow.

The Banneret stood up and reached the mage in a few small steps. At least they'd appeared small to me.

The mage opened his eyes wide and stuck out his hand, wailing like a banshee:

“It’s you!”

Little dancing flames fell from his fingertips and dashed toward Arthan, looking rather like painted table tennis balls, tiny and weightless. The Banneret effortlessly dodged one of them, cleft another one in two and sliced through the third one.

Hiss cussed. “Wretched Hatchlings!”

“What’s that?”

“Directional magic frag grenades. They disintegrate on impact. They don’t do a lot of damage but they do disable the shield.”

Not in Arthan’s case, they hadn’t. His fiery sword flashed through the air until my eyes began to hurt. It was a bit like looking at a welding arc. I just hoped I wouldn’t end up having to press raw potato slices to my eyes like I’d done when I was a kid. Having said that, this was magic, wasn’t it? I might have to use some healing topinambur slices, you never know.

While Arthan was dealing with the Hatchlings, the mage was busy casting Mantle on himself. It’s true that you should learn from everybody, especially the more experienced Players you come across. The mage cast the spell in short, jerky motions. He did draw a full circle the first time — just like I would have done — but after that, he limited himself to some rudimentary finger-twitching. I didn’t know you could do it that way.

It had taken him all of two seconds to cast nine or ten Mantles on himself. I duly tried to count them but this speedy customer was way too fast for me.

He raised his hands to the sky, apparently appealing to some bloodthirsty ancient gods — but Arthan wasn't born yesterday, either. The moment he'd finally reached his opponent, his fiery sword began striking cascades of blue sparks as he removed the Mantles one after another.

His moves may have appeared theatrical but they were very efficient too. He didn't shun dirty street fighting tricks, either, elbowing the mage in the face to disrupt a spell, then concluding another successful combo with a hearty kick in the chest.

Finally, the mage cried out in pain as Arthan's sword, instead of striking more sparks, slashed against his body. It was a good job its blade dripped fire — that way it cauterized the wound, preventing blood poisoning. Before I knew it, the Banneret dealt another blow, literally cleaving the mage in two. Good. Saved him the expense of medical bills.

I watched the two halves of a human body disintegrate. The sight was nauseatingly fascinating. They crumbled to dust before they got the chance to hit the tarmac. Arthan kicked the dust, then sheathed his sword, bent down and picked something from the ground. Unhurriedly he headed for the gate as if nothing had just happened.

Hiss darted off to open the gate for him. Why would he bother? The guy could easily leap over seven-foot hurdles, not problem. I'd just seen it with my own eyes.

The Seers met their chief with uneasy silence. They probably knew what was going on (which was more than I could say about myself) and expected some kind of statement from him — either to agree on it or to argue his point. I really didn't know how it all worked here.

"One of the Horsemen's minions, I suppose," the Banneret said. He wasn't even out of breath. "I didn't expect them to show up so quickly. We need to inform the Grand Master."

The bullman nodded. “And we need reinforcements. Eleven swordsmen isn’t that much.”

“Don’t forget your horn,” Hiss butted in, giggling. “It’s still a power to be reckoned with.”

I gave him a look of concern. Where I’d grown up, street kids didn’t appreciate these kinds of jokes. They could rough you up really badly for a quip like that. You were really taking your chances.

Still, the bullman laughed good-naturedly, followed by some of the Seers. He didn’t seem to have taken offense. I made a mental note: knowing what made them laugh was something worth remembering in case I considered a career change. I could become a stand-up comedian, why not? I was already a walking joke as it was, with no money to show for it.

“Nice talking to you guys,” I said, “but I must be on my way.”

“Where to?” the Banneret asked sternly.

“I’m gonna take the metro, it’s just outside, isn’t it? I need to get to the Proletarskaya station[2].”

The Banneret knew immediately what I meant. “You’re going to the Inn, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“Hiss and Zeus will see you to the station, just in case.”

“Zeus? For real?” my eyes must have turned so perfectly round you could have probably put them on display in the Parisian museum of Weights and Measures.

“That’s his nickname because he doesn’t get along with electricity very well. Or rather, electricity doesn’t get along with him. He gets electrocuted all the time. He even bought a skill for that, for what good it did him.”

A puny balding man elbowed his way toward me. He kept blinking as if he’d just got out of water, and the way he was stooping made him appear even shorter. He nodded and made his way out, trying not to attract attention to himself.

Once we got out, Hiss beelined for the dust left from the mage who’d had the indiscretion to single-handedly attack a Seers’ Residence. He rummaged through the remains — which I found rather cynical — then returned to us, apparently having found something useful.

“Arthan doesn’t bother with petty loot,” he explained, “but I don’t care. Waste not, want n—” one look at Zeus made him promptly shut up as if he’d tried to tell a dirty joke in front of the Queen of England. Still, Zeus didn’t react to his words at all.

We walked to the metro station is silence. I did my best to strike up a conversation but Zeus limited himself to some nodding and shrugging, while Hiss replied in curt monosyllables. What the hell had happened to the guy? It was as if he was unwilling to talk in the presence of the hapless “electrician”.

I didn’t bother to look any deeper into their shared history. I may be lots of things, but a shrink I’m not. So I just said my goodbyes to both — reserving a warmer handshake for Hiss — and dove into the subway, down to the station lined with a combination of off-white and burgundy tiles. I waited for my train and got in.

Both the station and the train were surprisingly packed. And by “packed” I don’t mean commoners. A young Player guy was waiting for a train on the opposite platform. Another one was sitting in the car next to

mine. And yet another one entered the train at the Lenin Station. What was this, a reunion or something?

The one on the platform nodded to me. The other two just turned away with deadpan faces. Whatever.

I reached my destination and stepped outside. The Inn wasn't really near the station so it was quite a walk, but it was even better like this. This way I killed two big fat birds with one stone: I followed Arts' and Hunter's advice to keep a low profile and also saved some time, because our metro with its calm stations and the tart smell of creosote was still faster than our Formula1 bus drivers.

The Inn wasn't exactly empty but it proudly sported a couple of free tables. Also, most of the Players inside were busy talking instead of just staring at the TV screen.

With the exception of Traug, of course. He seemed to be on a drinking spree. As was Litius. Arts, however, looked pretty nervous and fidgety. She very nearly knocked her chair down when she'd jumped to her feet on seeing me.

"Another half-hour, and we might have just as well gone home," she said angrily. "Can't you see those two have lost all sense of proportion? They just can't pace themselves!"

"I could easily drink the same again," Litius said, stroking his feline whiskers. "Alcohol doesn't affect me that much."

"And you think that's something to be proud of, do you?"

"Sergei? Fancy a drink?" Traug asked in a syrupy voice.

"Just one beer, no more."

I thirstily watched him fill the mug, then took a few big swigs and set the mug back on the table. “Now listen up.”

It took me a while to tell them the whole story, especially because they kept interrupting me. When I’d mentioned the werewolf — or rather when I’d mentioned Will himself — Arts all but exploded in sparks like a toaster in the hands of that Zeus guy.

“You have any idea who you were talking to? What are you like? William, the crossbow, Switzerland — well? Shit and shit! You’ve gotta tell me where he lives.”

It took me a while to calm her down without giving away Will’s address. I had a funny feeling he would have no problem following up on his threat. And I needed Arts alive. By the same token, I still didn’t know what she meant with her hints about *“William, the crossbow, Switzerland”*. Most likely, just yet another hero. Apparently, there was no shortage of them in Cesspit.

Once I’d finished my tale and was relishing the last of my beer, Litius sprang to life. “I find this attack thing very strange. I’m trying to assess all possible motivations for an assault like that, but I’m not happy with any of them.”

“Nothing to assess, my friend,” Traug managed, slurring. “You’re too rational, that’s all. Human beings are exactly the opposite. Trust me.”

“I never take anything at face value,” Litius said. “I need to give it a good think and weigh up all the pros and cons. The Seers and their secret mission is easy enough. They’re evacuating the Oracle and his library. Now the Order will have to act fast. Sergei? You realize who that Arthan guy is, don’t you?”

At this point, I finally managed to show off my general knowledge. “Of course I do. Too many coincidences. A knight who’s a master in Long

Blades, valorous and honorable... all that’s missing is a nametag saying *The King of Celts*.”

“Who are you two talking about?” Arts demanded, uncomprehending.

Now it was my turn to enlighten her. “You don’t read many fantasy books, do you?”

“Listen, guys,” Traug said in a low voice, “I don’t know the history of Cesspit and honestly, I don’t give a damn. Let’s talk about that wretched Clinger already! We don’t have much time. He might find some mercenaries tomorrow if not today. In which case, you know where you can stuff your Certhall, don’t you?”

I nodded. “Makes sense. So what is it you’ve managed to find out?”

“He’s now in the town of Chou, “Arts began. “It’s a big settlement near to the capital, where most trade routes meet and where you can always find plenty of hotheads for hire who won’t object to any job.”

“Then he must have hired someone already to get the stone,” I said.

Traug chuckled. “He has, but he’s still hiring. Which means he’s not too sure of success.”

“Which is why our best move would be to go see him and offer our services,” Litius began to ramble on and on. “And once Clinger tells us where to find Certhall, we’ll think of a way of getting to it.”

“Okay. In that case, once we're prepared...”

“What’s there to prepare?” Traug rose to his feet. “The longer we wait, the less chance we’ve got of getting the stone.”

“I never thought I’d say this,” Arts sniffed, “but I think Traug is right. Time is working against us.”

I glanced at my watch. They had a point. The day had only just started. We could go there, have a heart-to-heart with this Clinger, come back, and still have plenty of time to work out how to get the stone out of Elysium. Easy.

‘Plus, my uncle will be in Chou too. And he owes me money for the last shipment of the Rachnaids’ eggs,” Traug offered another killer argument.

“Okay, okay, I got it. Let's go to the Community.”

Half an hour later, we were already getting out of a cab under the driver's disapproving stares. The reason being, Traug had brought along a bottle of some psychedelic cocktail and kept sipping it while we rode, assaulting the cabbie's senses with an exotic aroma of some complex flavored alcohol.

“The best transfer through Purgator is via Skirtsville,” Litius remarked. “The city is too big which is why both the Kabirids and the Archali give it a wide birth.”

Arts shrugged. “What difference does it make? Skirtsville or Burrot, it’s only a transfer. All you do is throw some dust in the bowl, and that’s all you see of it.”

“Well, Sergei could probably take a look around it anyway while we’re waiting for the transfer. And secondly, it’s infinitely cheaper to go to Noggle that way.”

“Wait a sec,” I said. “What did you say about waiting for the transfer?”

“That’s just some idea Gatekeepers have. They won’t let you travel immediately across several worlds. When you arrive in Purgator, you’re obliged to wait until they let you jump to Atrain from where you can go to Noggle.”

“And how do they decide how long I should wait?”

“They look at your travel history,” Arts replied. “The more you travel between worlds, the shorter your waiting time. If you stop traveling for, say, a year or even a month, your waiting times begin to increase. Which is why you’re going to slow us down.”

“Come on, Arts, spell it out,” Traug laughed. “He’s really gonna drag us down. Never mind. What’s an extra hour between friends? At least that’ll give us a chance to pop into a tavern or two. There’s this excellent place in Skirtsville...”

“I don’t think so,” Arts said sternly. “And I’d like us to be clear on this. There’s time to drink and have fun, and then there’s time to do business. And if we fail because of you, I’m gonna burn you alive with these very hands. Korls aren’t immune to Fire, are they?”

Traug turned to me. “Sergei...”

“I’m sorry, man, but I think she’s right,” I said. “You’ve had plenty of downtime as it is.”

Traug’s gaze shifted to Litius who made a helpless gesture. “I agree with Arts on this one. It’s true that some research has shown the presence of antioxidants and resveratrol compounds in certain alcoholic beverages...”

‘Yeah right,” Arts grumbled. “Trust a cat to find an excuse for drinking.”

...”but other research has shown the ability of alcohol to impair signal transmission properties in a number of receptors,” the catman

continued, ignoring her quip. “Which can in turn impair the person’s coordination and alter their perception of reality. Which is why Players can’t afford to embark on any life-threatening activities while under the influence.”

Traug heaved a sigh. “And you, Litius! Never mind. I’m saying now in front of this bunch of killjoys that as soon as we’re back, I’m gonna go on a binge to end all binges until I-”

“Until you go blind,” Arts chuckled. “Why am I not surprised? Let’s go now.”

On top of the fact that we’d be obliged to wait for some Gatekeeper’s permission to travel from Purgator, we had to wait our turn here as well in a slowly-moving line of fellow Players. All of them were overloaded so badly they could barely move — their inventories much have been packed to the brim, not to mention the large bags in their hands bursting at the seams. They were all moving slowly toward the Gates, step after laborious step, taking all their hard-gained possessions with them.

It must have been a real shame. All these people who’d moved to Cesspit believing it to be relatively safe — and now this...

Having said that, I wasn’t exactly right. As it turned out, some of them were simply leaving our city, hoping to sit it out in far-off places — the likes of Norway, Japan, or even Australia. They probably thought the surge of deaths wouldn’t reach there. Yeah right. That’s exactly what people must have thought back in Pearl Harbor when they had a whole big ocean lying between them and the Second World War.

“Listen guys,” I suddenly remembered, “we need to make out a hire agreement, don’t we? To put it down on paper that everyone gets an equal share, 25% of the loot and all.”

“Good idea,” Litius said. “It’s always better to put it in writing-”

“Oh come on, Sergei, give it a break!” Traug interrupted him. “We’re not doing it for the money, are we? We still have plenty of profits from the Rachnaids’ eggs. Don’t be so stuck-up, Lish. We all trust Sergei, don’t we?”

“Of course. What’s wrong with you, fish eater? Are you short of cash for your favorite cat food?” Arts gave me a wink and slapped my shoulder. “Let’s go, it’s our turn now.”

“You’re being self-contradictory,” Litius said with dignity, attempting to reason with her. “Why would I want to buy cat food if I’m a fish eater, according to you?”

“Here’s a new word for you,” Arts said with a deadpan face. “It’s called ‘sarcasm’. Look it up. You’ll probably realize it’s not your forte.”

“No, it’s not,” Traug chuckled. “You’re not big at it, are you?”

We walked over to the stone and stood around it. Arts had already told us that our fare to Skirtsville was thirty-five grams each, so we poured the said amount into the bowl and held hands.

The next moment, we were standing in a deserted chamber.

A very unpleasant sharp musky smell hung in the air. Arts had already told us about that too. Apparently, the governor of Skirtsville wasn’t fond of Players — but there wasn’t a lot he could do about it, was there? Still, the guy was a real pig, literally: when everything else had failed, he’d built barns all around the Gatehouse and put some foxhogs in them: fat cumbersome creatures which indeed resembled pigs in a number of ways, including — especially — their smell. A couple of foxhog farms were all that was needed to stink the whole area out.

Arts gasped. “I already forgot what it smells like.”

“You could say that,” Traug said, looking at Litius who was pinching his nose. “But you get used to it eventually. The stink isn’t so bad inside the Syndicate, anyway. So I suggest we take a look around while we can.”

“Sorry guys,” I said, wrapping my raincoat tighter around myself. “There’s something I completely forgot about.”

“What’s that?”

“I left my clothes at home to be washed and put on some regular stuff instead. And you remember what happens to commoner clothes when you teleport, don’t you?”

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Chapter 10

LOTS OF PEOPLE must have had this dream — or should I say nightmare. You dream of going about your business as usual, doing something, talking to people, having fun, when suddenly you realize you have no clothes on. Oh, the horror of this realization! Grown-up people can't walk around naked, period. Because... never mind, they just can't, provided they're responsible members of society and aren't under the influence of mind-altering drugs. But in your dream there you are, standing stark naked in the middle of a crowd — it always happens in a crowd, for some reason — while all the others are staring and you just wish the ground would swallow you whole... and then you wake up.

Unfortunately, I wasn't dreaming. Having said that, the situation wasn't as bad. Instead of a crowd, I only had a few trusty friends standing next to me. Also, I'd kept a few pieces of my wardrobe on, such as my underpants, socks, boots and the raincoat which the Game had mercifully spared. But overall, I felt quite uncomfortable, a bit like a flasher stalking unsuspecting females in a park.

"Arts, d'you think you could draw me something quick to wear?"

She shook her head. "It's not quick. I would need to draw all the folds and other 3D effects in every detail, otherwise you'll get something as stiff as if it was drenched in cement. I have another idea..."

She started waving her hands in the air — not haphazardly as if brushing away a fly, but in a certain system, as if drawing a particular shape in the air. Unfortunately, I hadn't quite realized what kind of shape it was until she had the finished product already in her hands.

"What's this?" I asked.

“What do you think it is? It’s a skirt. I’ve just started learning how to summon material objects. Doesn’t always work though. I know I can’t make pants yet. Why are you staring? At least it’ll keep you warm!”

“I’m not wearing this, sorry. Do I look like a Scotsman?”

“Okay, it’s up to you. You can walk around with a bare ass if you wish. No one here’s gonna do any better for you.”

“I hate to blow my own trumpet,” Litius said, stroking his whiskers, “but I used to dabble in Sorcery at one time, namely clothes summoning. I gave it up because all those spells were pretty useless.”

“Lish, quit playing hard to get, please! I’ll get pneumonia in a minute!”

“Oh yes, sorry, of course.”

It wasn’t every day you had the pleasure of watching Litius cast magic. Before, he’d always struck me as pretty useless as a team member: he had no combat skills worth mentioning nor did he boast any mind-blowing abilities. Still, now his smooth, almost feline movements (then again, why “almost”?) betrayed a well-practiced confidence. A moment later, he was already holding a pair of pants and a loose shirt in his outstretched arms, flaunting them about like a Turkish bazaar peddler.

A plain undershirt of the KeeRoo Tribe

Summoned apparel

Time to disintegration: 59 min 59 sec

Peasant’s pants of the KeeRoo Tribe

Summoned apparel

Time to disintegration: 59 min 57 sec

“Which means we have just under an hour to find a clothes shop,” I concluded, pulling them on. “Litius, what’s this KeeRoo Tribe, do you know? Litius?”

His eyes faded to very, very sad.

“It’s my home tribe,” he mouthed softly.

None of us pressed the subject any further. We were a tactful bunch, after all. Cussing and groaning, I managed to bedeck myself in the magic duds while the others watched, suppressing smiles.

Because, as I’d just found out, this “summoned apparel” wasn’t the same as regular Game clothes — meaning it didn’t shrink or expand to fit you. The pants Litius had handed me were so short they hung above my ankles. That wasn’t a problem, of course: you couldn’t really notice it in my high boots. But the shirt was absolutely enormous, so big that I had to roll up the sleeves. The result looked suspiciously similar to a rather adorable scarecrow which had fled its post on a vegetable patch but lost its holey wide-brimmed hat in the process.

“Okay, handsome,” Traug gave me a slap on the shoulder, “off we go!”

With those words, we walked outside.

On second thoughts, I wish we hadn’t. The wave of stench literally knocked me off my feet. My head went round with the effluvia so thick you could cut the air with a knife. Its source was located further down the valley, about three hundred feet away: a herd of those so-called foxhogs shamelessly spreading the said aroma.

They were enormous — at least twice the size of regular pigs, with round earless heads, tiny puffy eyes and big fat pillars for legs. Next to

them, the man who was minding them appeared miniscule. He looked weird too, wrapped in layers upon layers of clothing, his face concealed by a large neck scarf and a pair of close-fitting goggles.

“Cleaner,” Litius explained, catching my surprised stare. “A very well-paid job but also very dangerous. Skirtsville’s governor forbids them from keeping the post for any longer than two years. Foxhogs’ waste is rather toxic. Having said that, their meat is clean, a bit similar to the pork you have in Cesspit.”

“Litius, please, is it really necessary? I’m gonna puke in a moment. This is enough to make one a vegetarian. Okay, where do we go now?”

Three hands shot up in the air, pointing at a large lone hill topped with a fortress. Its walls were so high and thick I doubted many Archali could make it over them. And even if they did, they’d be greeted with a hearty volley from the sturdy ballistas located on the big fat corner towers.

The city itself spread all around it like a giant octopus. The tiny Virhort was not a patch on this place! Even the obnoxious smell didn’t take away from its glory.

“That’s quite a hike, isn’t it?” I asked.

“We don’t need to go to the city. Look over there.”

Only now did I notice a thin tower which stuck out like a needle against the backdrop of the city’s bundled mass. Indeed, it wasn’t that far: a fifteen-minute walk, if that.

Predictably, I got it wrong. It took us a good half-hour to reach it. At first, I was busy sightseeing, admiring the sandy valley on our side and the luscious green groves on the other. Finally, it occurred to me that this was a good opportunity to discuss the subject which interested me the most.

“How do we know that we can travel on?”

This simple question seemed to have puzzled all of them, Litius included. You had to give him his due though: he was the one who at least attempted a reply.

“I can’t be entirely sure but this is something of a gut feeling. You just *know* it’s time to continue on your journey.”

“That’s right,” Traug nodded. “It’s as if someone gives you a smack on the head with a ladle.”

Arts shrugged. “It’s probably just your subconscious kicking in.”

“The Gates connect all the worlds, so Players, even if they’d love to think otherwise, are all connected within the fabric of the Game,” Litius went on.

“Has any of you ever asked yourselves if all of this is really necessary?” I pressed on. “What’s the purpose of the Game? And what makes it a game? Why are Players also called Seekers? What do they seek? You’d think these were simple questions, wouldn’t you?”

Litius nodded. “Where do we come from and where are we going, this sort of thing. That’s what everybody wants to know when they first come. It may sound like a contradiction in terms but the problem is, the Game isn’t really a game. I mean, it’s not one of those computer simulations which has all the answers already lined up. Here, there can be several answers because each of us has to answer his or her own question, different for every one of us. I have a theory: I think the reason we’re called Seekers is because each of us seeks his or her own way in these worlds.”

Something clicked in my head. “And once they find their answer, they become a God.”

“Gods are those who’ve achieved absolute mastery in their development branch,” Traug said. “That’s common knowledge, isn’t it?”

Arts rolled her eyes. “You, you personally — you know of any?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Then would you please shut up? That’ll save you putting your foot in your mouth next time. Gods are Players capable of opening new paths to other worlds.”

“Okay, okay, I can see now,” I raised my hands in a conciliatory gesture to stop Traug from retorting. “It’s as clear as mud. If even the very concept of the Game can have several explanations, I doubt we’d get to the bottom of this one either. You’d better tell me how they managed to squeeze the whole of Community into that tiny little tower?”

“Just like they squeeze the whole of the subway into one tiny little tunnel,” Arts quipped, mimicking me.

One look at two grim Players guarding the entrance — one a Purg, the other human — made me wish I could crawl under a rock and die. But to my surprise, we didn’t have to say anything to them. I lingered behind, staring at the many bowls which topped a low row of sticks protruding from the ground. All of them were emitting smoke.

Arts yanked at my sleeve, pulling me past the Guards who were by now studying me with a rather unhealthy interest. We entered the tower through the door and found ourselves in a large hall ending in a spiral staircase leading down.

“Traug, it’s better you go first,” Arts suggested. “I know we have nothing to fear here, but better safe than sorry, you know.”

“No problemo,” Traug agreed with a remarkable ease. He probably wanted to get on Arts’ good side — ether that, or he just felt flattered that she considered him a power to be reckoned with.

The place was actually quite well lit by little round lamps on pedestals which looked just like plastic floor lamps from some home improvement shop. There still were a few darker spots but not too many. The staircase, too, was wide enough to allow several creatures to pass each other without hindrance.

‘Skirtsville is a city state,” Arts began to explain, walking alongside. “It’s strong enough to ignore any offers or ultimatums coming from both the Kabirids and the Archali. Unfortunately, in our case it’s not a good thing. The current governor isn’t very fond of Players, so the relationship between the Community and the city proper is quite strained at the moment. Where the farms are now, all used to be a shopping district. He had them torn down and had those stinky farms built instead. As a friendly welcome gesture, you know. In return, Players stopped allowing commoners into the Community.”

“Why, were they allowed before?”

“Sure. You remember, don’t you, that Purgator is one of the few open worlds where commoners know the truth about the Game? So logically, they’re not banned from the Community like they would be in other worlds. That gave the locals an opportunity to buy all kinds of in-Game goods, provided they had dust to pay. And now they've been stripped of that right. Did you see those two minding the entrance?”

“As if you couldn’t notice them!”

“They’ll kill any commoner who tries to sneak in.”

“Do they serve the Community’s governor?”

“The local community doesn’t have a governor. It’s controlled by a Council of six vendors who take turns running the Community. They collect a percentage of every deal closed in the Community and use the money to keep a squad of Guards. About two hundred years ago they tried to set up a

small armament factory but they were quickly cut down to size — and those who survived, learned that they shouldn't encroach on other Players' turf."

"Why?"

"Because armament production has long been shared between several central worlds. Some of them specialize in high technologies while others focus on making excellent charmed swords. It's a closed shop, whatever you make. They will tolerate you as long as you dabble at it, selling a few dodgy DIY swords a month to those gullible enough to buy them. But the moment you attempt mass production..."

"Let me guess. They send you a message to let you know you're overstepping the line?"

"That's right. First, they send you a warning. And there won't be a second one."

"And if the swordsmith in question fails to see their point?"

"Then they send in a group of well-armed top Players, with weapons and training to match. They raze the factory to the ground, kill the workers and confiscate the weapons. And they're immune to bribes and coercion. Some weapon makers have tried to hire their own hotheads but it's a bit like sending a porcupine against a tank. So most weapon makers just move to the central worlds. Whether willingly or not quite, depends on how far their pride stretches."

We reached the end of the staircase and walked out onto a spacious gallery lined with little huts. Each hut had a big pipe which disappeared through the cave's ceiling. Aha. So that's how they aerated the place, by simply drawing in the outside air.

It's true that I'd expected the local Community to be tiny — but now I could see it was big enough. The tunnel kept snaking amid rock walls and salt stalagmites, leading into the hill's underground depths toward what was

probably the Community's biggest house, complete with the Council presiding in it. Still, we had no intention of going that far.

Litius waved his hand at the fifth house to our left. We entered — or rather, we squeezed ourselves in because the inside of it was really cramped. The tiny room can't have been more than six to nine feet, the shop's counter heaped high with second-hand clothes. We were greeted by a Purg who sported ***Craftsman*** as his development branch.

On seeing Litius, the guy very nearly jumped to the ceiling with joy. "Fancy seeing you here! How long has it been, man?"

"Thirty years?" Litius suggested. "In Purgator years, of course. Great to see you, Crel. We need some clothes for this young Korl over here. He's going home."

"A *Korl?* Well, if you say so," the vendor said with a sarcastic grin. He squeezed his way toward me past all the junk and started feeling my muscles. "He's a bit puny for a Korl, isn't he? Too much human blood. This calls for a different type of clothes. Wait a sec."

He dashed through the curtained doorway in the back and promptly returned, loaded with stuff. "Here's some Alabass wool. That's what humans normally wear on their first trip to Noggle."

"You'd better think again," Traug butted in. "He may be a half-blood but he's still a Korl! He'll boil alive in all this shit!"

"Okay, okay. Take a look at this. D'you need clothes with stats?"

"Preferably, yeah," I replied.

After another quarter of an hour, sweaty and exhausted from all the countless fittings, I was holding a thick pair of grayish wool pants. The items' descriptions were especially amusing — I had a funny feeling it was Crel himself who'd come up with them:

Warm Pants of the Mountain Tribes

+4 to Unarmored Combat

+2 to Stealth

-1 to Athletics

The Warm Pants of Mountain Tribes,

Good for all of Noggle, even for bards and scribes!

Admittedly, I did my best to resist him pushing them on me. I wanted to buy a different pair, of light cotton but without a debuff to Athletics. But Traug vetoed my decision, so I had to make do with the former.

Also, Traug forced me to buy a fur hat with earflaps, which was actually not that bad.

Crooked Cap

+50 pt. to mana

+2 to Sorcery

+1 to Stealing

A crook who's wearing the Crooked Cap

Eludes the eye and is not seen on a map!

And finally, a brown wool jacket with a high collar, sold with a free bonus of a statless linen shirt.

Jacket from the Foothills

+3 to Unarmored Combat

+2 to Bribery

+1 to Resistance

The warm Jacket from the Foothills

Will serve you well in the direst of chills.

Uh oh. His homemade verse probably made one Bill Shakespeare turn in his grave at the speed of an industrial fan. I found them quite funny, actually.

“How much for all of this?” I asked, scooping up the stuff.

“Very little. A hundred twenty grams in total.”

“How much?”

“Don’t forget we have to give the Governor his cut. And you won’t find stuff like this anywhere else.”

“I know I won’t. Your sweater smells... actually, it stinks.”

“It doesn’t stink. I treat all of my merchandise with smoke to get rid of the foxhogs’ smell. That’s why it’s only a hundred and twenty.”

I froze, listening to my inner voice. Then I just pulled out the money and paid him.

Litius materialized next to me. “Sergei, I may be a very accommodating individual but even I can see it’s too expensive.”

I’d actually forgotten all about him. All this time, both Traug and Arts had been making their presence known, talking between themselves or making snide comments about me. But Litius hadn’t said a single word since we’d entered.

“We’re too pressed for time to haggle,” I said.

I hurried to bedeck myself in the freshly-bought apparel and winced. The pants were very prickly, reminding me of my childhood days when Mom would make me wear woolen leggings to school. Oh the agony when you’d run back in from the frost, peel them off and dig your nails into your legs, scratching them raw. I shuddered with the memory.

I felt like an onion in all those layers which immediately made me hot and uncomfortable. I scrambled outside and headed for the spiral staircase with all the grace of a bear trying to climb inside a dog kennel.

“Wait a sec!” Traug protested behind my back. “I thought we were going to the inn?”

Arts must have given him one of her evil eyes because he promptly changed the tune:

“I mean, we all need a bite to eat, don’t we? And I’m parched, too.”

“We don’t have the time. We need to go.”

“The path has opened?” Arts asked.

I focused, trying to listen to myself.

It was a strange feeling. I’d never felt anything like it before. A bit like a far-off seamaid singing her song to me, luring and waving, but I was the only person who could hear her.

“That’s right,” I said. “Why haven’t I felt this before?”

“Because before, you never had the intention to travel. I don’t know why it’s like this. It’s just that if you know your destination, the Game will help you reach it. Within reason, of course.”

“Meaning? When you say ‘within reason,’ do you mean Archaeth?”

She paused, hesitant, but replied anyway. “D’you think it’s worth trying to get somewhere which has been off limits for quite a while?”

“Yeah, but who’s gonna tell me what prompted the Chorul to sacrifice himself? What was the significance of making me a Player, of all people? What’s the flippin’ sacred symbolism behind all this? Never mind. We have more pressing problems right now.”

Climbing back up the stairs proved much harder. By the time we’d got out I must have sweated buckets — literally. I’d never thought I’d be happy to breathe the obnoxious double-up-and-puke toxic smell outside — but I hung my folded raincoat over my arm and offered my face to the breeze. Wonderful.

That didn’t mean I’d warmed to foxhogs, oh no. Litius could insist all he wanted, but we weren’t going back the same way. I’d pay whatever they charged me, but I wasn’t coming back here any time soon. Let them live underground, wear their stinky clothes and eat their fake “pork” dripping with fat. In my personal Top 10 of the worst cities of all times, Skirtsville had soared to No 1, overtaking even Virhort.

The Gatehouse was empty. Of course. Whoever had had the chance to flee this stinking hole had already done so. We all chipped in fifty-eight grams each (all this traveling between worlds might soon leave me broke) and held hands while Arts shouted,

“Taul!”

Nothing had changed. I all but headed for the exit but several pairs of hands grabbed at me, keeping me where I was.

“We’d better wait here.”

“Why, what’s wrong with this Taul place?”

“Lots of things,” Arts replied evasively. “Atrain isn’t the most welcoming of worlds.”

“S-s-safer th-th-this way,” Litius agreed.

So we had to crouch on the floor and wait.

After about half an hour, I sensed a weirdly pleasant warm feeling spreading over my chest. I climbed back to my feet and nodded to the others. Arts put on a warm jacket and changed her dainty little bottines for a pair of fur-lined high boots.

Traug and Litius began pulling some warm clothes on too. What did they think they were, polar explorers? I donned my raincoat too just in case, even though sweat was already pouring down my forehead. Let’s see what that Chou place was about!

“Chou!”

I saw the change in temperature immediately. The torches on the walls crackled, threatening to expire at any moment. Our breaths came out in clouds of steam; my nose was already stinging with the bitter frost.

My hands reached into the inventory on their own accord, producing the Crooked Cap and slamming it on my head. I wasn’t a John Snow to walk around bare-headed in subzero temperatures!

Traug reached for a neckscarf and wrapped it around the lower half of his face. “Try not to take deep breaths,” he advised me. “And pull the

sweater up all the way to your eyes."

He walked over to the exit, opened the door and peeked out, stretching. "Home sweet home! Welcome to Noggle, everyone!"

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Chapter 11

IF A RUSSIAN POET OF OLD were to be believed, *“having traveled East and West, we find the smoke of homeland best”*[3]. Either it was supposed to be poetic license, or Noggle had ceased to feel like home after all those years, but I didn’t feel ecstatic at all about it. The cold was unimaginable, so bad it could even freeze thoughts in your head.

On top of that, the moment we’d exited the Gateway we immediately got sidetracked. A burly fur-clad Korl (as if there’s such a thing as a puny Korl) darted toward us. He was hugging a leather briefcase, looking rather like a pension fund rep about to sign up a new payee.

“Haisa. Karl et ara?”

“Haisa. Er ana,” Traug replied.

“I see,” the guy replied. “Where have you arrived from? Is this your first visit to Noggle? Anyone need a visa?”

“Just cool it, will you? We've arrived from Purgator. No, it’s not our first time. No one needs a visa, either. I have guide’s credentials.”

The guy sort of deflated. “Show me.”

Traug produced a parchment scroll and handed it to the man who skimmed through it and returned it to my friend. Then he opened his briefcase and took out a pencil.

“Traug of Keralon, I am reminding you that once you leave, none of your group are allowed to stay behind. One catman, one half-Korl and one human female: three in total. The absence of any of you can only be excused if supported by a death certificate. Otherwise, your guide’s

credentials will be declared null and void. Anyone amongst you who's never been here before?"

I raised a reluctant hand.

"The rules are simple. You're not allowed to defend yourself unless your life is in danger. Any acts of aggression toward a local, whether a Player or a Commoner, are punishable by prison. Try not to engage in conversations with commoners, as that can attract the Collectors' attention. And mind the Warings. That's basically it. Enjoy your stay! Thank you for coming to Chou," he walked away, making it clear his mission was complete.

"Traug? Who are those Collectors he was on about?"

"The Commoners have police of their own, don't they? Well, the Collectors are its elite force. They're constantly snooping around, ferreting, seeking out traitors of the Crown. The moment you overstep the line, they snatch you and make an example of you. Corporal punishment, torture, that sort of shit."

"And what about Warings?"

"They're a bit like our Guards, only they do it for a living. They swear the oath of allegiance to the Emperor."

"Is the Emperor a Commoner?"

"Of course not. Once he reaches maturity, he gets initiated. There're no exceptions."

"Well, doesn't that mean he plays a double game?"

"He has to! I'll tell you more: the local Holy Synod reports to him, informing him of their successes in eliminating the heretics, including Players. The Emperor listens and pompously nods his head, thanking them

for their vigilance. Don’t worry. Nothing can happen to you provided you’re careful. There’re not so many Players here, anyway.”

“Why not?”

“Because one of the paths to Purgator lies through Ullum, the home world of beastmen. So many Players prefer it to this cold gloomy place which is my home.”

I looked around. Indeed, the place did look a bit drab and sort of devoid of color. Line after line of neat identical log houses — which seemed to be well insulated, as far as I could see — showed that these people knew a thing or two about keeping frost out. Whiffs of chimney smoke trailed to the sky; the air smelled fresh with just a hint of the odor emitted by my new clothes. True, this world was far from hi-tech, more like the late Middle Ages — but I could also see the two- and three-story houses of richer townspeople which must have constituted the town’s center.

After Purgator, this actually looked quite good. True, this wasn’t the warmest of places, especially if you weren’t born a Korl. That’s why I found it quite surprising that some Players preferred Ullum, the beastmen’ world. I wonder why?

“Why?” I repeated out loud.

My friends weren’t in a hurry to answer. Arts kept casting hesitant gazes at the other two. Traug lowered his head, pretending he was very interested in the snow-covered pavement.

In the end, Litius was the one who replied.

“Ullum is basically a reservation. This is the only place where the Gatekeepers laid the route themselves, for the first and only time in the history of the Interworld Network. That’s the only place where beastmen are allowed to live now — but we still have no rights compared to Players.

Which is why Players like visiting Ullum, seeking all kinds of entertainment. Personally, I call this slavery.”

“Why don’t the beastmen rebel against it?”

“Not after the War of Beast and Man. We try not to think about it anymore. The Players stormed through the couple of dozen worlds inhabited by beastmen, leaving death and desolation in their wake. It was genocide, wreaked by all kinds of Players: humans, Korls, Purgs, Jorolths... And it’s only because we were different. So now we just try to survive.”

“Lish, I really don’t know what I can possibly say... I just hope that life will sort it all out in the end. I’m sure that one day the beastmen will take the place they deserve in this world.”

“So am I. Thank you.”

“Are you done crying on each other’s shoulder?” Traug asked, faking cheerfulness. “How about we do something productive for a change? Over there.”

The streets here were perfectly straight. Even though they weren’t tarmacked, the snow packed between the cobblestones made up for a smoother walk. I couldn’t see any idle passersby: all the Korls appeared focused and businesslike as they hurried past, looking truly impressive in layers of furs and sheepskin coats. Next to them, I felt like an impostor.

Only once a group of local commoners walked past us, looking eerily like a squad of guards clad in long overcoats with fur collars and gold buttons, in shaggy fur hats, with sheathed swords dangling from their belts. They just had to be the local police.

“Gosh, it’s cold,” Arts said, huddling up.

How I understood her. My cheeks were already tingling, my fingers numb; my feet felt like blocks of ice. I could only imagine what she must

have felt if even I with my Korl blood — for whatever good it did me — felt uncomfortable to say the least.

“Noggle is in fact very similar to Cesspit,” Litius began to explain, “even though its planet is half as big again. But its star is considerably colder, which reflects on the climate.”

“Why are you such a bunch of killjoys?” Traug grumbled. “It’s winter, what do you want? In summer, this place is sheer bliss! It’s so warm you can walk around without a fur hat. Here, we’ve arrived.”

I’d expected something like this. A large house with a faded sign over the door. I could have probably read what it said — provided I knew the local language.

A Korl doorman stood next to it, shrinking his head in his shoulders as he spoke to a commoner. Correction: he argued with him.

“The guy says he works for the Government,” Traug pointed at the insistent commoner. “Says he needs a drink and a place to get warm. And that one,” he shifted the pointing finger at the doorman, “says his master doesn’t like strangers. Says it would be safer for the visitor to find another drinking hole.”

I immediately knew what he meant. “Because they only accept Players, not commoners.”

“Exactly. Follow me.”

Traug gently shouldered the Government worker aside, very nearly sending him sprawling onto his backside on the pavement, and stepped toward the doorman. He rolled up his sleeve, baring his arm to the elbow, and proffered it to the man who did the same. They shook hands.

“Haisa, Traug. Ar da oor.“

„*Haisa, Burn.* Hey, whatcha standin’ there for? Come inside.”

“*Haisa,”* I murmured as I slid past them into the dark room.

The few patrons cast unhappy glances in our direction — but as soon as the front door had closed behind us, they resumed their conversations, albeit watching us from the corners of their eyes.

Traug motioned us toward a table nearest to the wall. We took our seats.

“My nose is about to fall off,” Arts said, shivering. “I’m never coming back here, ever!”

Traug shrugged, removing his coat. “You get used to it.”

The room was indeed quite warm. Okay, it was probably just over 60 degrees but after the bitter frost outside, that felt okay. The large fireplace was fitted with a turnspit complete with a roasting pig — never mind it had a jawful of scary-looking fangs.

The window panes were thick; they definitely weren’t glass, judging by the weak dull light that barely seeped through them. As for the patrons, most of them were my burly compatriots, plus a couple of humans sitting apart and a stunningly handsome creature of the same race as I’d seen the other day in the company of the mechanoid back in our own Community.

“You stay here, I’ll go get us something to drink,” Traug gave Arts a long look and added, “Otherwise it’ll look suspicious.”

He soon came back with a plateful of some local cold cuts and a steaming jug, then brought us three beer mugs and a smallish wine cup which he set before Arts.

A whiff of spicy wine reached my nostrils. Arts gave him a grateful nod and started sipping it. As for us, we attacked the local ale which was

strong and hot with a slightly bitter aftertaste. The cold cuts turned out to be frozen fish, something I absolutely didn't look forward to after all the cold, so I limited myself to my drink.

"That little guy over there, that's Clinger," Traug murmured after a while.

Singling him out in the crowd wasn't at all difficult. Of the two humans, one had already left his table and headed for the door. Clinger stayed put. His nickname suited him well, with his thinning hair combed over his head, his long nose and thin lips. The man was so skinny you'd think he'd been starving on a regular basis, even though right now he was enthusiastically tucking into a fried chicken.

"You stay here," I said. "I'll go speak with him."

"Sergei, considering all the data I have, it would probably be wise to allow a more experienced Player to approach him," Litius butted in.

"Just cool it, will you? I have a couple of aces up my sleeve. Four, even. I'll get it all sorted. What's his name again? I don't think he appreciates people calling him his nickname."

"François Soler."

Trying to keep my breathing level, I approached the stranger. Mom had always told me that one should never strike up a conversation with someone busy eating. But those were Cesspit rules. Somehow I doubted these people were familiar with the idea of manners.

"Hi François, how are you? Mind if I sit down?"

The man gave me a long look. "I think you're confusing me with someone."

Oops. Not the best pickup line. Never mind. Time for ace number one.

[∞]

“Are you Clinger?”

Without waiting for an answer, I slumped onto a stool opposite him.

François licked his fingers and set the chicken leg aside. “Depends who’s asking.”

“A job seeker. Rumor has it, you’re hiring.”

“Which rumor?”

“Clinger, how about we cut the crap? I have lots of Korl friends. One of them sent me a word. So are you hiring or what?”

“I might be,” he said, wiping his hands on his clothes.

Your Lying skill has increased to level 14.

Trying to act nonchalantly, I produced my moon steel knife from my inventory and started playing with it. “Not a wet job, I hope?”

“No, it’s not. The thing is whether you think you can get hold of some Illustrious Players.”

“I have one in my gang already.”

“You know what? I don’t think I’m gonna hire you.”

What the hell had I said *now?*

[∞]

“Cat got your tongue? D’you know any Illustrious Players or you don’t?”

“It’s not gonna be easy but I don’t think it’s a problem.”

“Good. I like the way you talk. You say it as it is. I’ve seen lots of Players, and they all talked tough. Tried to bullshit me. But I can see right through them all.”

X-ray vision, yeah right. Served him well until today. “So what kind of job could that be that requires help from an Illustrious Player?”

“Need to collect an item from the Archali. They keep it in Aarat Tkhel.”

“Oh, that,” I said with a meaningful shake of my head, as if I’d understood a word of it.

“I know, I know. It’s not an easy task. That’s why I’m paying good money for it. 10K dust.”

Now I had to struggle to play it cool. I didn’t even bother to mentally convert dust to rubles as was my habit. Because I risked a heart attack if I did. In my book, 10K of dust was a veritable king’s ransom. Okay, I still had to divide it by four — but even then it still was a nice healthy sum of money.

Clinger grinned a nasty dirty smile which was perfectly in keeping with the rest of him. “I can see I managed to convince you.”

“The money sounds good. But you still haven’t told me what I’m supposed to be looking for.”

“Just a trinket. Something of sentimental value. I got it from my Dad, you see. It’s no good to anyone else,” Clinger screwed his face into a mask of carefree nonchalance.

I in turn pretended I’d believed him. 10K of dust for the pleasure of retrieving your late father’s memento, yeah right. You’d have to be a crazy millionaire to do something like that, and he definitely didn’t look the part.

Still, he told me everything (or almost everything) I needed to know about Aarat Tkhel — and it wasn’t good news. The way he described it, we might need an Illustrious Player, after all.

“That’s basically it,” he said. “Let me be honest with you: you’re not the only group looking for it. Two days ago, a team of five mercs led by Hirve the Gold-Ringed Orc left for Elysium. They were followed by a couple of beastmen, but I’m not sure about them. But Hirve the Orc — you need to get up really early to outsmart him. Of course you should give yourself some prep time, but you shouldn’t drag it out for too long.”

“Okay, I got it. Give me the map.”

“Not so fast. Or did you think I might just send you there without any guarantees on your part? What if you decide to steal my stone?”

“So what do you suggest?”

“Nothing, really. Just swear me an oath, that’s all.”

Clever bastard. And I’d relaxed already, thinking he’d allow me to lead him down the garden path. No such luck. Very well, I’d have to swear it, would I? From my experience, even the trickiest situations had their share of sneaky solutions — it’s just that not many could notice them.

“Okay,” I said. “What exactly do you want?”

“I want you to swear an oath saying that you’ll hand the stone over to me and that neither you nor any of your group members will try to hurt me.”

I all but ground my teeth. Shit. Still, I didn’t show it. Instead, I beamed. “Is that it? Okay, I swear to Clinger from Cesspit that if I manage to retrieve the stone, I’ll hand it over to him, and that neither I nor any of my team members will try to hurt him.”

The next moment, all eyes were on me — or rather, on the bright glow which had enveloped me once I’d finished speaking.

Looking happy, Clinger offered me his hand. Not for a handshake though. He was clutching a scrap of parchment.

“Excellent,” he said. “It says here how to get to the rock. The wretched thieves keep it closely guarded. Normally, there’re two or three Archali keeping an eye on it at all times. You need to think of some way of luring them out, to allow the Illustrious Player to steal the stone.”

“Got it,” I said, disintegrating the parchment.

I zoomed my own map out as much as it would allow me. It showed Noggle first as a flat scheme, then as the tiny bead of a planet strung on an ephemeral string which looped on through space toward the hi-tech central worlds, growing thicker as it approached them. Our own world, Cesspit, was in a rather uncrowded area at its very edge, after which the thread looped toward Purgator and further on, toward four more beads, three of which were even marked: Elysium, Mechilos and Atrain.

That’s right. The reason I could see the names of the first two was because I had fragments of their maps. And as for Atrain, I’d passed it on my way here, hadn’t I? That only left one world still concealed from me: Firoll, the birthplace of the Kabirids.

“Any questions?” Clinger asked.

“Yeah. How do I find you when I get the stone?”

“Right here. I come here around midday and leave when Erchil is about to set. Erchil is the local star. And one more thing. Do not try to pick up the stone with your bare hands. Buy a pair of blacksmith’s tongs or something and have an anti-destruction spell cast on them. I’m not paying for any scorched limbs.”

I nodded and stood up. “Clear enough. Wait for us here. We’ll go fetch the stone for you.”

Unhurriedly I walked back to our table and related the whole conversation to my friends while sipping my drink which was already stale but relatively warm. Admittedly, I had their undivided attention. Even Traug kept casting sad glances at the empty jug, reluctant to leave for a refill. Arts listened to me open-mouthed like a child to a fairy story. Litius alone frowned, stroking his long whiskers.

“Whew!” Traug breathed a sigh of relief once I’d finished. “And there I was thinking this was something undoable. We’ll just go, throw a few punches, take the rock from the Archali, end of story. My reputation with them is bad as it is, anyway.”

“Had it been so easy, Clinger wouldn’t have needed to hire so many people,” Arts pointed out. “And he definitely wouldn’t pay 10K dust for the pleasure of doing it.”

“I’m afraid she’s right,” I said. “The worst thing is, the stone is apparently in Aarat Tkhel.”

“Aarat Tkhel... Aarat Tkhel...” Traug repeated, as if tasting the words. “No, I don’t know any tomb of that name in Elysium. Which means I haven’t been there.”

“You couldn’t have even if you’d wanted to,” Litius said with a grim expression. “Aarat Tkhel is one of the Archali’s most sacred places. According to their legends, that’s where Creator gave them their wings and their powers.”

“Which is why only an Illustrious Player can gain access to it. Meaning a player with over 5,000 points Karma. And that’s something none of us has, as you well understand. So we need to put our heads together and try to figure out how we could produce a guy like that.”

Litius heaved a sigh. A grueling silence hung over the table.

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Chapter 12

AS WE ADVANCE THROUGH LIFE, meeting new people can become a challenge. Over the years, we tend to develop a certain lifestyle complete with a set of habits and a particular worldview. While we're still young, we can be more forgiving of our neighbors' trespasses — but as we grow older, we become increasingly demanding toward new acquaintances attempting to enter our well-appointed lives.

And when it's not even a human but a big, loud, larger-than-life Korl who seems to take the entire space around him, such an encounter might not bode well from the start.

"My nephew's friends are my friends too," thundered Vreig (or was it Vreieg? I hadn't quite caught it). "I have excellent Iorolfin brandy! Wait a sec, I'm gonna fetch some glasses."

Well, good luck to him. When Traug had told us that he needed to pop in at his uncle's who had an office in Chou, I'd expected, er, let's just say I'd expected something more respectable than scattered heaps of miscellaneous stuff including a huge bundle of fine silver cups and several rusty swords laid out on the table. Half the book shelves were empty, the fireplace was choking on burning paperwork, and the floor was littered with dainty carved little boxes, all of them open and empty.

All of the above gave me the impression that Traug's uncle was in a bit of a hurry to flee the place.

"We're only here for a second, *Khton*," Traug tried to apologize. He repeated the word "*Khton*" several times, from which I concluded that it must have meant "Uncle" or some such. "And I'm afraid, we don't have time for a drink. We need to be getting back to Cesspit ASAP. It's a bit urgent."

Talking about which, he was dead right there. Because our Great Unsurpassed Computer Litius-346 had already concluded that looking for an extra Illustrious Player for the team just wasn't worth it. It was much easier to rush either me or Traug all the way up to 5000 pt. (because we were the only ones with positive Karmas) to make our own Illustrious Player for the team. The question was, how were we supposed to do it?

According to Litius, the solution was simple: we had to do something meaningful for commoners, something of considerable importance to them. Why commoners? — because they were much more approachable. Players remained loners, even those of them who joined Orders and other dubious associations. If we had to chase after every one of them just to help them, it might take a lifetime.

Which was why we had to choose a particular commoner town and do something quick and meaningful for its denizens. Choosing such a place in need of our services remained a problem though — but Litius had promised to sort it out for us.

Still, in order to choose the right place, he needed information. Lots of it, Game-related as well as the regular kind, just so that he could analyze the facts and come to a particular conclusion. But then Traug had said, "Seeing as we're in Noggle anyway, we might just as well collect the rest of our egg money."

I didn't play hard to get. Money was always welcome. You just couldn't tell when it might come in handy.

"Traug my boy, since when have you learned to say no to a good drink?" his uncle's voice boomed, cheerful as champagne bubbles. "Before, people always used to share a toast before discussing a new undertaking. Those wretched Kabirids! Where are those glasses now?"

"We've only come to collect the egg money," I said, not waiting for Traug to get his act together.

“Money! Money! Traug, who’s that half-baked Korl doing the talking?”

Never before had I seen my burly friend Traug looking embarrassed. He was trying to say something but couldn’t. Still, his reaction made it perfectly clear that his uncle had just insulted me. Not that that was a problem; there’s nothing a good slap in the face couldn’t fix — or a good kick in the balls even — but still, my parents’ upbringing prevented me from taking any rash measures.

“I’m the one who killed the Rachnaid Queen and got hold of the eggs,” I said. “Any more questions?”

“Traug, I need to speak to you in private,” his uncle said, continuing to ignore me. “It’s something to do with our agreement.”

In all honesty, my friend was a sorry sight. He looked a bit like a hungry dog looking at a piece of steak that his owner had placed in front of him but forbidden him to eat it. He cast me a begging look but I had no intention of giving up, especially seeing as his uncle seemed to have the same effect on him as a python on a rabbit.

“We’re staying here,” I said. “All of us.”

Finally, Vreig (or was it Vreieg?) deigned to look at me. That’s exactly the kind of look one gives one’s boot toe smeared in cow shit. Oh great. Our relationship had got off to a good start!

“Litius,” I said, “How many eggs did Traug leave with his uncle to sell?”

“Sixty-seven in total.”

“If I’m not mistaken, we gave him a wholesale discount, bringing the price down to thirty grams. Which is...”

“Two kilos ten grams,” Litius summed up.

“Considering the fact that you seem to be embarking on a far-off journey — possibly in connection with your being fired from your job — I’d like to get paid now. That’ll save us the trouble of having to look high and low for you.”

Vreig made a helpless gesture. “I don’t have the money. What can you do about it? You gonna call Warings? But we don’t have an agreement, do we? You have no evidence, I’m afraid.”

“Traug,” Arts glared daggers at my friend, “don’t tell me you didn’t make out a contract with him.”

“But he’s my uncle!” Traug protested, looking utterly upset.

“We don’t need evidence,” I said. “On the contrary. If you’re so unwilling to pay us, we might just take the money ourselves.”

“Who, you? For a snotnose, you’re too cheeky! You have any idea who I am?”

Traug’s uncle stepped back and drew his swords, producing one from his inventory and unsheathing the one on his belt. Even before the combat had begun, I knew by those first movements that I was facing an expert.

“Sergei, don’t,” Traug rushed to stop me. “He’s the fourth sword in the Empire among all the Players.”

“And I’m the first among all the scumbags in Cesspit.”

“I want you all to be my witnesses,” Traug’s uncle said with a carnivorous smile, “I didn’t want this to happen.”

Yeah right. In his dreams. Somehow I doubted that this self-proclaimed fourth sword in the Empire was a patch on Hunter, whom I'd defeated on occasions. And I now had 3 time rewinds in my arsenal already because one more had come back on our way here from the inn, while we were discussing the errors of our respective ways.

I didn't even bother to draw my Katzbalger. I just reverse-gripped my knife and began to approach him really slowly, making it clear I wasn't going to lunge at him headlong. Vreig just watched me, grinning and shifting his feet to make sure I didn't try to flank him, as he extended his left hand in expectation of my attack. I already knew he was left-handed, courtesy of my Observation Skills. My Perception also offered some weird word I didn't know. Never mind.

I was good enough as it was. In what exactly, you may ask? I'll tell you: my forte was my ability to counteract, backed up by my time rewinds. So basically, the whole duel was about who would lose their cool first.

As far as I was concerned, we could dance like this for as long as he wanted. His office was big, save for all the heaped-up stuff on the floor which could get in the way, I suppose. But that wasn't much of a problem. Even my friends had stepped back to the door, leaving plenty of space to swing a cat — or a sword.

Still, my opponent didn't boast much patience — either that, or he probably had a couch to catch. Either way, he seemed in a hurry to get out of here.

Admittedly, he was good. You don't get called the fourth sword in the Empire for nothing. He feigned a swipe, then immediately lunged forward. His sword pierced my right chest, making a nasty screeching sound against my ribs.

The pain wasn't limited the wound area — it seemed to grow inside me. As if in jest, the Game informed me:

Your Unarmored Combat skill has increased to level 13.

Oh well. So much for my initial intention not to hurt him too much. Now I had to.

[∞]

I dodged left, crouched, then shot my knife hand upward, watching with satisfaction as his sword went through this air while my moon blade sliced across his wrist, leaving a deep cut which immediately filled with blood. It took me another second to get to my feet while claret poured to the floor: it looked like I'd grazed the vein.

Your Short Blades skill has increased to level 18.

Vreig didn't make a sound — but he did drop the sword. I wanted to shout something funny like "Put your hands in the air! Your money or your life!" but promptly changed my mind. He clenched his teeth so hard that his jaw nearly seized. The guy showed no intention of giving up.

After another minute of our Mexican standoff, my opponent must have begun to realize his time was running short. A crimson puddle had already formed around his feet; his complexion was getting paler by the second, and no one seemed in a hurry to call the ambulance. He attempted another sharp lunge which I dodged on my own, not even bothering for a time rewind. The fourth sword of the Empire seemed to be in a bad way.

His temples were covered in perspiration. He licked his dry lips, tightened his grip on the sword and mustered the last of his strength to come at me. I decided to play along and stepped forward, bringing my weight to my right foot. Immediately he attacked me. I tried to parry his lunge but wasn't very successful. The tip of my ear wasn't impressed by my effort as it dropped to the floor, severed.

[∞]

What do they say about a danger foreseen being half avoided? Why “half”? If you know the direction the said danger is coming from, you have plenty of time to soften the blow — even build a nice big concrete bunker, if necessary.

At least in my case I could. I ducked under his arm, slipped behind his back while his sword was once again romancing thin air, and gripped his throat, bringing my knife real close.

“You still don’t wanna talk?”

Your Persuasion skill has increased to level 18.

Vreig didn’t reply. His sword dropped to the floor, followed by the rest of him, so I had to slip my knife back into my inventory double quick and catch Traug’s uncle in mid-air.

“I can manage,” I told Arts who’d darted toward us.

Why not? Sooner or later, I had to start leveling Regeneration, so why not try to use my brand-new spell?

The little cut I’d dealt him probably didn’t qualify as a Minor Wound because the spell hadn’t healed him completely, but at least it had almost stopped the bleeding. Also, something rather important had happened:

Your Regeneration skill has increased to level 1.

You’ve reached level 12

I was dying to take a look at the distribution of bonuses — but I had our debtor dying on us right now. Okay, maybe not dying, but he was

admittedly in a bad way.

“Can I help him *now*, or d’you want us to wait till he kicks the bucket?” Arts asked sarcastically.

“Okay, what do you have?”

She reached into her album and produced a vial of dark murky liquid. It was the same stuff she’d drunk when the Alpha had wounded her back in Purgator. She must have drawn another one since — or even several, maybe.

She pulled the stopper out and poured the liquid into Vreig’s mouth. He opened his eyes and even tried to scramble back to his feet.

“Keep still, Mister Fourth Sword in the Empire,” Arts said in the same sarcastic tone. She reached into her album for some bandages and deftly dressed his wound. She was much better at it than I used to be back then.

“This is a quick job for a professional healer,” she said, “and the bleeding isn’t that bad at all.”

“You okay, Vreieg?” I asked.

“It’s Vreig,” Traug corrected me.

Damn it, I’d still got it wrong! Still, this time no one seemed in a hurry to take me to task for my blunder. Traug’s uncle seemed to have changed somehow, as if he was seeking support from those around him, mainly from his nephew who kept averting his gaze.

“Vreig,” I said, “I can’t really say we’re enjoying your company. So as soon as we sort out this little money problem, we’ll be on our way.”

“The problem is, I really don’t have a single gram of dust left,” he said, avoiding my eyes and looking me in the chest instead. Even his booming voice had gone softer. “I lost everything to a visiting cardsharp, down to the last speck. Not just your money but also that of the Crown. I still owe him.”

“Can you swear on that?”

“I swear to you, half-blood warrior, that I don’t have a single gram of money. I can’t even pay the rent.”

“Shit,” I said, staring at the bright light that enveloped him. “Arts, is there anything here we could take?”

“Just junk. Unless you’re interested in wine cups and all that tableware. I’m not even talking about those rusty swords. They’re not worth jack. Even if we try to sell them, they won’t fetch us anything.”

“Oh.”

“I could pay you in information, if you wish,” Vreig managed. “That’s all I did all my life, meeting all sorts of people.”

“We already have someone who does just that, thanks.”

“He’s telling the truth,” Traug echoed. “My uncle is indeed the best smuggler in this part of the world.”

I chuckled. “Really? Are you sure? Not the Fourth one?”

Still, that gave me an idea. Why not? It just might work. “I’m looking for a Player with a particular set of skills.”

“Which is what?”

I told him. I was afraid he'd just shrug and shake his head, as in, *that's something I don't have*. But he just smiled.

"Of course!" he boomed, his voice regaining its annoying cockiness. "I have lots of friends who fit that description. Which world are we talking about?"

"Oh? Just like that? Okay. The world — let's say, it's Cesspit."

"In Cesspit, it's Adjeena. Last time I saw her, she was here," he handed me a scrap of parchment.

Not another map. I disintegrated it and checked my interface. Istanbul, oh well. Curiouser and curiouser.

"I want you to swear an oath that you're not lying to us and that this information is genuine."

Strangely enough, despite his many dubious "virtues", he seemed to have told us the truth. How funny.

"How long has it been since you saw her last?"

"About thirty years ago, I think. But I keep getting word about her. She seems to be still working and living there. I don't think she'll be hard to find. But if I could ask you about one thing..."

"Which is?"

"Don't tell her I sent you. Last time I saw her, we didn't part well."

I cast another look around his office. Indeed, there was nothing of any value here. I walked over to the table and picked up the half-empty bottle. At least I'd try some real Iorolfin brandy back home.

What else could you possibly do with this creature? Okay, you probably could take him to the Emperor or whoever meted out justice here. They might pay you a hundred grams for handing him over. But that was too much work. Also, he was my friend's family, albeit far removed (literally).

"Come on then, let's go," I said.

We were already leaving the room when Traug who was closing the rear turned round to face him.

"You're not my *Khton* anymore. Bye."

Good. That's one gestalt closed. I'd helped my friend, now it was time to check what I'd got out of it.

I opened my interface.

Available points: 3

Strength: 29 (x)

Intellect: 23 (x)

Fortitude: 26 (x2)

Agility: 30 (x3)

Stamina: 22 (x)

Rhetoric: 27 (x2)

Speed: 18

Made sense. My Shooting skill had raised my Agility, and the constant need to talk my way in and out of trouble had improved my

Rhetoric. I rather sadly tapped Speed in the secret hopes I might bring it up to 25 one day, then walked outside.

If one day life became too much to bear, I just might quit and settle down in Chou. Nice place. None of those hipsters in rolled-up pants — just a bunch of Korls in good warm overcoats. Instead of supermarkets, they had taverns: according to Traug, the local inns could cook any kind of critter to order and deliver it to your doorstep, provided you could pay. How's that for a delivery service? Even the town center here was quite clever: the central square was formed by a frozen lake surrounded by a neat row of impressively tall houses — every one of them three floors high.

According to Traug, during the warmest summer month the lake was known to thaw a little. Not for very long, though. In other words, life was good here. A bit cold, maybe.

Pondering these frozen thoughts in my equally chilly head, I and all the others trotted back to the Gatehouse, to be head-checked by the same Korl with the leather briefcase. Did he suspect that there were more of us leaving than had come? Or whether our beastman had somehow turned into an Abbas? Or whether Arts had had sex change surgery? We had to grin and bear: only when he was finished, could we finally teleport back to Atrain.

Everybody seemed bent on not telling me what was wrong with that particular world. They wouldn't let me out to see for myself either, the bastards. I had to spend the whole time waiting inside, staring at the motionless Gatekeeper and his stone. It could have been my imagination, but somehow the rock seemed to actually be livelier than its silent keeper in his suit of armor. But at least our wait on the way back was much shorter.

Despite Litius' numerous reassurances, we returned via Virhort. I really didn't want any more stink bombs anywhere near me. I decided against visiting Jumping Jack, remembering only too well the outcome of our last meeting. Especially because Traug had stolen his whistle, hadn't he, which by now had been safely disintegrated.

I wanted to visit Tartr — but oddly enough, his house was locked. How strange. He hadn't struck me as the globetrotting type. Taking every possible precaution, I then ventured out of the Community into Virhort proper. The Purgs were busy restoring their ravaged houses; the sky over the castle was teeming with human bats. The city had changed hands again. Predictably so.

I watched it for a while, then returned to the Gatehouse: our time had come. One last transfer, and here I was, back in my home world. I'd never thought I would be so happy to see my city again. Other worlds were undoubtedly great — but there was no place like Cesspit. Only now had I understood what made it so attractive to creatures from all the other worlds. It's the peace of mind.

Litius gave me a firm businesslike handshake. "I'll try to come up with an answer to our problem by tomorrow morning."

"Which problem?"

"How to raise Karma quickly and efficiently."

"Ah, that. Yes. Of course."

"And I think I'm gonna go and get drunk," Traug's voice rang with threat.

Arts chuckled. "Why doesn't that surprise me! Just try not to look like a limp vegetable tomorrow, in case the fish eater does find a solution."

I heaved a doomed sigh, unwilling to listen to more squabbling as Litius had already opened his mouth to point out he was not a fish eater at all. "See ya tomorrow, everyone!"

"Wait for me," Arts snapped. Meeting my surprised stare, she added, "I'm going in the same direction."

Without saying a word to each other, we left the Community and headed for the bus stop. There, my phone — which I'd collected from the Gatekeeper — disrupted our mutual silence.

It was a call from a strange number. My Intuition promptly kicked in, sending my heart fluttering even before I picked it up.

"Hi, Sergei," the familiar voice said.

Anything just not to hear that voice again!

"I've been trying to get through to you all day. You seem to be away with the fairies... traveling between fantasy worlds, if you know what I mean. What about Devil's Sulfur? It's been a while, you know."

"I was just about to call you," I lied without a hitch. Still, there was no change to my Lying skill status: the old fox hadn't believed me. "I've managed to get the amount you need. I'm gonna text you the address where we can meet."

"Good. Make sure it's a busy public place though. I know you're reasonable. You wouldn't want to ruin your sister's life over a petty problem like this."

Not bothering to reply, I hung up, then turned to Arts. "Fancy going with me to teach a couple of Archali a good one?"

If the girl had some plans of her own, she didn't show it. Instead, she just sniffed and nodded.

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Chapter 13

SOME PEOPLE LIKE TO THINK they'd made it all the way to the top — while in fact they'd simply floated up like one stinky brown substance, if you know what I mean. Sooner or later, life tends to sort the wheat from the chaff anyway, by sending someone who just might cut the cheeky upstart down to size.

And now I had a funny feeling it was about time that this particular Archali family had its personal comeuppance. I didn't even pause to contemplate whether Valfail had a wife or a family of his own. He'd overstepped the line and had to pay the price. Because family is sacred.

To my chagrin, I had to borrow 300 grams of dust from Arts. Or rather, the moment I mentioned it, she immediately shelled out, saying she hadn't forgotten she owed me and that she'd just wanted to pay me back in one lump sum. I probably looked like a millionaire who had to ask his friends to pay for him in the bar because all of his cash was "tied up in business". Normally, an excuse like this gives the said friends every right to show the self-appointed millionaire the door because he doesn't have any cash to begin with, all they want is to bum a free drink.

But in my case, I indeed resembled a broke investor. Apart from Arts owing me a pretty chunk of change (although this was different and I had no intention of squeezing it out of her). I also had Talsian's sword and the remaining eggs still up for sale. Okay, the eggs were a very special merchandise, not an everyday staple like bread (or vodka). I knew it might take me some time to get them off my hands. But why wasn't the sword selling? Either someone had been too greedy and priced it too high, or there was something about it I didn't know yet.

"Oh," said Conjurer as soon as we walked in. "That's gonna be quite a job, you know that?"

He'd been good. It had taken him less than an hour to arrive from the moment we'd called him.

I'd chosen that place the night after I'd met Valfail. I'd gone for a walk, and the idea had just struck me. Asking Conjuror to help me had been the easy part; finding a suitable place had proven to be much harder. Still, in the end I'd found what I had in mind: a small closed bar up for sale in one of the side streets. Its previous owners had even left a few tables and chairs — or maybe they simply hadn't gotten the chance to collect them yet.

Also, the place hadn't yet attracted any squatters. Some teenage hooligans had broken in though and smashed a couple of windows. That didn't speak well for a certain Fortress Security Firm apparently entrusted with keeping an eye on the place, judging by the colorful sticker on the door. In any case, we had no problem getting in and finding the electrical box which was luckily still in one piece.

We turned the lights on. I looked around, taking in the desolation. Then I cleaned the nearest corner from the broken glass and set up a table and a few chairs.

As far as I was concerned, this was a perfect setup. The bar's address was still listed on the Internet, complete with the pictures of its interiors. It was as if it was still up and running.

Now just a few final touches.

"Gosh, this is awful," Conjurer said, flipping through the bar's pictures in the phone.

"Why, is it so difficult?" I asked anxiously.

"No, not really. It's just so trashy. What do you call this kind of style?"

“Eclectic,” Arts helpfully offered.

“Yeah right. It’s more like the ‘we bought it at a junk sale but we’ll replace it once money starts pouring in’ style. I can make it much better if you wish. I don’t promise a Versailles but at least it’ll look decent.”

“Oh no no no,” I shook my head. “We don’t need decent. We need identical.”

Conjurer sighed. “As you wish.”

I half-expected him to start waving his hands in the air casting his magic, but he simply closed his eyes, as if trying to focus.

What happened next I could probably describe as several surging waves rolling over the room.

The first one wiped away the cobwebs and the damp patches on the walls. The second one swept away all the litter — all the empty wrappers, cigarette butts and miscellaneous junk scattered on the floor. The third wave restored the furniture, repairing the broken chairs and polishing the old tables.

The fourth wave brought a great many bottles lined up on the display behind the broken bar which was now in one piece again. The fifth wave filled the room with patrons and infused the air with the soft sounds of background music.

Finally, the sixth wave turned Arts into a cute little waitress in a mini skirt, transforming Conjurer himself into a bartender complete with a tea towel draped over his shoulder.

“What the hell is this?” Arts cussed, staring at her bare legs which weren’t actually hers.

Conjurer shrugged. “Why not? Looks quite sexy, if you ask me.”

For once I agreed with him.

“I want this skirt to be longer!”

“Okay,” Conjurer agreed with the air of an artist offended by a client’s request to add a few touches to the finished painting.

“Much better,” Arts said, smoothing out her new knee-length skirt. “So, what do we do now?”

“We wait,” I replied.

I sat down at the only table which was still in one piece and started watching the room. Conjurer was an expert, you had to give him that. Two puny beer-bellied dudes unenthusiastically shoved each other on the dance floor, settling some scores. Three girls perched on the bar stools, one a real looker, the other two rather homely. From time to time, all three dissolved in laughter, apparently seeking attention.

A second waitress walked out of the storeroom: a plump middle-aged woman who said something to Arts matter-of-factly and walked on to serve one of the tables.

Correction: Conjurer wasn’t an expert. The word was an insult to his artistry. It was like calling Mozart a good piano player. Conjurer was a true maestro.

After a while, Arts brought me a beer. “On the house,” she dropped.

It smelled like a draught, it looked like a draught and it even tasted like one. Oh maybe it was just wishful thinking. It didn’t quench your thirst though. Illusion remained an illusion, no matter how masterful.

I cast a couple of Mantles and Veils on myself and prepared to wait.

The two Archali bastards arrived ten minutes behind the agreed time. They walked in warily and stealthily as if expecting a trap. Still, they visibly relaxed when they saw that the bar was busy. Just like the last time, the son's face screwed into a lecherous grimace at the sight of the tipsy ladies.

"Hi."

This time Valfail knew better than proffer his hand and chose to save face, just slumping into the chair opposite. His son immediately set off wandering around the room. Better that way. It would keep him away from the front door.

"Do I understand correctly that you have what I asked you to get?" Valfail asked, fidgeting with impatience on his chair. I just prayed he didn't break it too early.

"I just decided it was time to sort out our little misunderstanding," I said.

"My thoughts entirely. So where's my sulfur?"

"Your sulfur?" I smiled. "It's where it's always been. In Kabirids' guts."

"You're joking, aren't you? I thought we had an agreement?" his eyes filled with a mixture of fear and incomprehension.

"It's just that I can't really be sure that I'll never see you again after tonight. Can't be sure anyone would want to blackmail me again."

"I can swear you an oath," Valfail said in a trembling voice.

I nodded. "Sounds good. Problem is, I'm not sure if I can trust you. You and your son might even be up to more dirty tricks. And I don't even

care if I’m at the receiving end of them — but I can’t allow this to harm my family.”

“You’re an intelligent man,” the Archalus grabbed at the tabletop as if it could protect him. “You won’t attack me here, surely. The Guards...”

“They won’t find out,” I sharply rose to my feet and drew the Katzbalger.

“Max!” the Archalus called out to his son like a banshee, stepping back and drawing... a *gun*?

Oh shit. My life hadn’t prepared me for this turn of events.

What was wrong with swords and knives? Was it really necessary to start with his trump card? It was a good job I’d cast protection on myself, of course, but on the other hand, the gun was unlikely to be loaded with only two bullets.

Having said that, I wasn’t a whipping boy, either. I grabbed the table and lobbed it at him like a matchbox. An ordinary human would never have been able to pull off a trick like that — but was I a Korl or just a pretty face?

Hs first bullet disintegrated one of my Mantles — but his second one kissed the ceiling as the table slammed into his chest, sending him to the floor. He promptly fired again. The bullet headed for my right shoulder but was stopped by the crumbling protection spell.

I really wasn’t looking forward to more pain, so I decided against sacrificing my last Mantle.

[∞]

I dodged the bullet which whizzed past. I wouldn’t call myself a new Neo but it wasn’t too bad. In one leap I swiped at Valfail. He wasn’t born yesterday, either, so he’d already cast protection on himself too.

His next slug hit my chest, stripping me of my last shield. Now I stood helpless before a Player bundled up in several Mantles. I didn’t even know how many they were.

Then I found a rather elegant solution to my dilemma. True, I couldn’t kill or hurt him anymore — but no one said I couldn’t touch him, did they?

Turned out, I was right. I gently took him by his right elbow, took a hearty swing and hurled the Archalus against the opposite wall. What a shame there wasn’t a panel of judges watching this. They would have all scored me at least a nine.

It actually worked. Valfail tumbled to the floor, showered with sparks, and dropped his gun which ricocheted from the wall and flew into a far corner. I was about to deal him the coup de grace when something bashed me on the head.

My skull groaned; my vision darkened. It was a good job I hadn’t passed out at once.

[∞]

I swung round to face the son who was running toward me with a hefty ashtray in his hands. An impressive item, if you ask me. No idea what Conjurer had conjured it up from, and I really didn’t want to know.

I lingered for a split moment, wondering how best to take the guy out — and by doing that, I’d allowed him just a tad too close. My self-preservation instincts must have voted for giving me another chance in this life as they kicked in just in time.

I stuck my hand out, casting a hurried spell with my fingers. The little shit flew backward as if struck by a cannonball.

Your Mysticism skill has increased to level 4.

You've taken the first step toward acquiring the Reformer ability.

Thanks to your extreme skill in using the Telekinesis spell, you've gained the Combat Telekinesis spell.

I stared at my own hand in surprise, feeling like some super Jedi who'd accidentally discovered the Force. So they were right in saying that in critical situations, we can tap into our bodies' utmost reserves. Which was exactly what had just happened to me. I would need to sit down and give it a good think. Not now, though.

I swung round and strode toward the father stirring on the floor, sheathing my Katzbalger as I walked. I lifted him by his lapels and got busy beating seven shades of angel shit out of him.

My first few blows felt weird, as if I was punching a concrete wall. Still, the cascades of sparks were a clear indication that I kept removing his Mantles one after another.

Finally, my fist connected with his jaw. After all the shields, it felt soft and even pleasant to touch.

Bang, bang, bang, bang! I was losing it, turning his face into a bloodied mess. Could it be my Korl blood waking up, with its constant craving for a good scuffle?

A new system message finally stopped me.

Your Hand-to-Hand Fighting skill has increased to level 9.

I froze, staring at Valfail — or whatever was left of him — in surprise. His broken nose was flattened to the side, his upper lip a fat crimson lump. His left eye was so swollen you could barely see it while his right one had rolled inside his head and didn't react to the Light I'd cast.

Still, he wasn't dead yet. His chest barely rose as Valfail kept clutching at this life.

I climbed back to my feet, walked over to the gun, picked it up and walked back. Strangely enough, I had no qualms about what I was going to do. As long as this guy was alive, my family was in danger. If he died, our problems would die with him.

I tried to listen to my gut feeling but it was silent. It was as if something evil had curled up deep inside me, watching all my actions with malicious glee.

Whatever. I didn't give a damn.

The gun's muzzle stared impatiently at Valfail. I pulled the trigger. Again and again.

Your Shooting skill has increased to level 27.

You've killed a Player who was neutral to you.

-100 karma points. Current level: +2180. You gravitate to the Light Side.

A change in development branch available: ***Snoop****. In order to activate it, you need to select it as your new development branch within the next 24 hours.*

You've gained the Sharp Eye skill.

You've gained the Incremental Apparition spell.

I unhesitantly swiped away the annoying and insistent ‘change in development branch’ message. Then I peered at the ashes disintegrating at my feet. There was definitely something there. But first, I remembered the other character of this opera production.

“Please, please,” the fake ‘Max’ shrank into the wall the moment I turned to him. “I won’t tell anyone, I promise! I’ll leave this world. I’ll go somewhere else.”

“You can’t. You’re a commoner. No one will let you.”

Then it dawned on me. He wasn’t a commoner anymore, was he? The Player has died, long live the Player. The Game didn’t care whom to initiate, as long as the person was present at the death scene.

“You want me to spare a freshly-minted Player who watched me kill his own father? I’ve seen a few action movies, you know. There, such things normally end very badly.”

“Please, please,” Max sobbed. “Please...”

Doubts crept upon me like gray thunderclouds, momentarily concealing the bright sun of my confidence. Still, I promptly dispelled them. I might have been a bad Savior but at least this was rational. You can’t leave such things behind you and just get on with your life. It may have been just a gossamer thread connecting us — but it could grow into a powerful cobweb. We all need to solve our problems as they arise, without waiting for them to mutate from a petty hiccup into an unsurmountable hurdle.

“Sorry,” I said.

My gun spat out just two more slugs. For him, it was plenty. A neophyte with no knowledge of protection spells; someone who hadn’t

gotten the chance to learn a single skill; a kid without even the most useless ability to his name? He didn't need much.

Your Shooting skill has increased to level 28.

You've killed a Player who was neutral to you.

-100 karma points. Current level: +2080. You gravitate to the Light Side.

A change in development branch available: ***Snoop****. In order to activate it, you need to select it as your new development branch within the next 24 hours.*

Your reputation has changed to Cutthroat.

I lobbed the gun aside and leaned over his ashes. A few condoms, two crumpled one-hundred ruble notes[4], and a bunch of keys. He was probably desperate for a life of luxury. Well, tough luck.

His father was a different story. This undercover millionaire had a whopping 416 grams of dust on him, plus a stack of letters in the Archali language and a weird long item with an ergonomic handle.

Mini-size Plasma Thrower K133

Penetrates all types of physical shields with the exception of Blanket and the Imperviousness ability which comes with Destroyer's Avatar. Removes all physical shields which your opponent may have cast on him or herself, provided their class is lower than Blanket.

That was it. Just a couple of lines. Indeed, what was there to describe? The thing could break through any kind of defense, period, not making an exception for Mantle even. Just killed you on the spot. In which

case, why had the Archalus reached for the gun and not for this amazing uber schtick?

“Oh wow,” Arts said, walking over to me. “You have any idea what this is? I’ve only seen one of these once from a great distance. Because it __”

“I know. It breaks through any force shield with the exception of some Blanket and something else, I didn’t quite get it.

“That’s a children’s toy,” Conjurer walked over to me. “Totally useless in your case.”

“Why?”

“See that slot on the left? It’s to load it with plasma clips. And as you can see, it’s empty. That’s probably how the Archalus managed to lay his hands on it. To buy one that’s loaded and activated, you need a special permission from one of the central worlds’ rulers. You’ll need it to buy new clips, too. That’s why you’ve just become the proud owner of a very powerful but equally useless weapon.”

“You seem to know an awful lot about the central worlds.”

“You bet. Which is why I try to avoid them as much as I can. And so should you if you don’t want to die young. And now, if we’re done with small talk, I’d like to get my money and leave.”

“You’re not so shy anymore, are you?”

“No, I’m just as prudent as I used to be,” he said with a crooked grin.

Then he disappeared.

I looked around me, unable to suppress a smile. That son of a bitch! Instead of the motley bunch of patrons, I faced a couple dozen identical Players, all wearing the same clothes, hair and faces. Good illusion, nothing to say.

“You’ve kept your side of the deal,” I said. “So here’s your money.”

I pulled out a rather hefty pouch: a kilo of dust. A new car; a shabby room in a shared apartment; or just a year’s worth of comfortable life. Still, I’d given him my word. Also, it wasn’t for nothing that dust had been chosen as the Game’s currency. They could have done it on purpose, sending you this kind of subliminal message.

“Put it by the door and walk back to your place,” twenty mouths said in unison.

I obeyed their request — or rather, their order — and walked back to Arts.

Twenty Conjurers lined up in single file and headed for the door. As they walked past the purse, each of them bent down, feeling it. Finally the eighth (or the ninth, I didn’t really count) grabbed the money and rushed outside.

The door slammed shut behind him.

The illusion disintegrated. Once again we were standing in the trashed bar.

“He could have said goodbye,” Arts said.

“Why? I don’t think we’ll see him again. Tomorrow morning he’ll be already in some tropical paradise.”

“We need to get rid of the gun,” Arts said, suddenly restless. “As far from here as possible. Give it to me.”

“And the spent shells,” I said, as I joined in the cleanup.

“You gonna make home okay?” I asked once we got outside.

“Sure. I’m a big girl. See you tomorrow at the Community?”

“Yep.”

“And, you know... you did the right thing.”

I smiled. “Maybe.”

I didn’t even notice getting back home. Regardless of what Arts had said, my conscience felt pretty sore. Sure, my name wasn’t Raskolnikov, and the two Archali didn’t resemble the feeble pawnbroker lady in the slightest, but still the events had left a bad taste in my mouth. For the thousandth time, I told myself that I’d done the right thing — but it just wouldn’t make me feel any better.

At least I managed to check the abilities I’d gotten from Valfail. He turned out to be a much better catch than Pull had been.

Sharp Eye (Intellect). Allows you to see items clearly, both at short and long distances. Your current level of Intellect allows you to select one of the following applications of the ability: to sentient beings, animals, or natural objects.

This one was a no-brainer. Sentient beings, please. What next?

Incremental Apparition (Mysticism). Allows you to teleport within your range of vision. Warning: your final destination should be clearly visible!

Cost of use: 200 mana points

Wait a sec. Teleport, they said? Never mind its range was badly limited, it was still worth it. I also took the chance to check my Telekinesis which had so conveniently upgraded on its own accord:

Combat Telekinesis (Mysticism). The ability to use Telekinesis to deal kinetic damage, including direct attacks on your enemy.

Cost of use: 100 pt. mana

That's some nice freebies Sergei had earned himself today! Let's just hope his eyes weren't bigger than his belly.

I climbed out of the taxi and was on my way to my front door when I mechanically glanced back. Immediately I froze.

Had it not been for my freshly-gained Sharp Eye, I wouldn't have noticed him because he'd done a great job blending in with the opposite wall. Still, between my new ability and my Observation Skills, I didn't have a problem ID'ing him.

A Player. And I didn't have a shade of doubt that he was stalking me.

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Chapter 14

THE WAY I SEE IT, the very essence of success is in the right timing. Lots of people were busy working on this social media thing but it was Zuckerberg who trumped them with Facebook. Sikorsky didn't even invent the helicopter but it took his talent and dedication to open the first production of that particular type of aircraft.

Some might say that it's just luck, pure and simple. Well, it is and it isn't. He who just sits on his backside staring at the wall will never get lucky. But somebody else who's focused on his or her objective and does everything to achieve it, can very possibly count on their fair share of luck. In other words, if we do everything promptly without leaving it till tomorrow, we stand a decent chance of achieving our dreams.

Which was why the moment I'd noticed the stalker, I decided to have a few words with him. Not about the weather, you understand, or about the economic crisis in Venezuela, but about something rather mundane. As in, who the hell he was and what he wanted from me.

He was quite far away from me though. Which was why I decided to use my freshly-acquired spell.

My hands drew a small circle, then dropped to my sides, fingers splayed wide.

The setting around me changed. It felt like a brief bout of vertigo. You know, when you get off the couch a bit too fast and you get this swimming sensation before your eyes, that's how it actually felt. Only when my vision had stabilized did I realize I was standing in a totally different place — next to the house where my stalker was still standing only a few paces away from me.

Your Mysticism skill has increased to level 5.

There was only one drawback in this situation. My feet were trapped within a heavy bank of snow topped with a thick layer of ice. Because when I'd tried to visualize my "destination", I'd honestly imagined this spot to be clean from snow. I'd had no idea it was covered too, simply because I couldn't see it behind the snowed-in garden. So here I was, with my legs immured in ice, watching the alarmed Player run away.

[∞]

Your Mysticism skill has increased to level 5.

This time it was marginally better. I just landed on top of the snow, sinking into it to my ankles. By the time I scrambled out, the guy had already legged it.

Never mind.

[∞]

Your Mysticism skill has increased to level 5.

Finally, a decent try. I landed on the sidewalk about ten yards away from him. We stood face to face; the only escape route he could take was by running in the opposite direction. And I was quite in the mood for a game of chase.

Still, he managed to surprise me. He crouched, placed one foot on the wall and jumped.

Or rather, it looked like he'd been shot out of a cannon. He landed on both feet about forty yards away from me and legged it. I didn't see any point in chasing after him.

But before he left, I'd managed to glean a few things about him, courtesy of my Insight and Observation Skills. The former had kindly informed me that the guy's development branch was Hopper (with compliments from Captain Obvious). And the latter had offered me some very interesting food for thought. Just as he'd performed his amazing aerobatics, the guy had momentarily turned his wrist toward me, sporting the symbol of the silver-painted crisscrossed circle.

The sign of the mysterious reactivated Order reminded me of Hunter. Curiouser and curiouser. What did my mentor want with me? Couldn't he have just come and asked me upfront?

I dialed him just in case, but his phone was predictably out of range. How very weird.

I scrambled to my front door and climbed upstairs. I could smell roast chicken already from below. You just can't confuse that smell with anything.

I was right. The aroma came from my apartment.

I removed my raincoat and decided to show off before Bumpkin.

Your Mysticism skill has increased to level 6.

The kitchen stool crashed to the floor, announcing my arrival. I also hit my knee real hard.

[∞]

Your Mysticism skill has increased to level 6.

This time I did it by the book, materializing in the kitchen a few inches away from the intact stool. I even raised my hands to the ceiling

fixture, as in, *the appearance of Holy Sergei to the amazed believers.* It failed to impress Bumpkin though.

“Whatcha doin’ standing in the clean kitchen in your street shoes? Look at all the mud prints! Come on, teleport back into the hall.”

Easier said than done! The spell cost me 200 points mana — and seeing as I’d done it twice already within the last five minutes, I didn’t have enough for another one. I was only a few points short, thanks to my new Crooked Cap, but still it wasn’t enough.

I removed my boots and carried them back into the hall. By the time I’d come back, the kitchen floor was already clean and my house goblin was busy carving the chicken.

“Bumpkin, why are you under the weather?”

“Just a bad feeling I have.”

“Which is?” I asked, attacking the tender fowl dripping with hot fat.

“I can feel something coming. I can feel you might perish.”

“Meaning?”

“I’m afraid you might leave and never come back. That’s what it is.”

“Yeah right! I’m not going anywhere.”

“Man proposes but God disposes,” he replied grimly.

That was strange. Bumpkin had never struck me as the God-fearing type. I tried to turn it into a joke but he didn’t react to my teasing. He just asked me if I had any more tasks for him to do and if not, he’d rather retire. After which he holed up in his ceiling closet and kept rustling with something there in a rather angry and reproachful manner.

Julia called, apparently trying to invite herself over for a cup of tea (and whatever else it ensued). Still, I declined, claiming fatigue and the busy day at work tomorrow. And I hadn't lied: I was literally spent.

So I just had a quick wash and climbed into bed.

Although I dozed off straight away, I didn't sleep well. I kept having these recurring flashes of obscure and troubled images, like giant silhouettes looming over me or voices screaming for help.

Finally, slumber paralyzed me.

When I opened my eyes, dawn was already breaking. I wasn't refreshed in the slightest. I got the impression that instead of getting some rest, I'd just done more work. A bit like the guy who had to push a loaded truck uphill in his dream.

Bumpkin took a peek into my room, nodded and went back to the kitchen to make breakfast. In the meantime, I headed for the shower, to wash away the remnants of last night's scary phantasms.

I smartened myself up a little, got dressed and even attempted to have breakfast — or rather, picked at Bumpkin's souffle omelet. I just had no appetite. Especially because Bumpkin — who would normally wait about hanging on to my every word — had left the kitchen and was now busy rattling the contents of my closets under the pretext of tidying up. So I pulled on my boots and raincoat and left.

The weather was in keeping with my mood. Heavy gray clouds, the kind you only see in winter, hung low the sky. The recently driven snow appeared filthy. The unpleasant smell of something chemical hung in the air.

I looked around, then checked the corner of the building. I couldn't see anyone. Why not try Apparition? The more I used it, the quicker I'd

level it.

Still, it didn’t work quite as planned. Not only had I failed to up Mysticism, I’d very nearly bumped into Professor.

“Sergei?” he asked, almost knocked off his feet by surprise. “Where did you spring from?”

He looked more surprised than scared. After some deliberation, I decided not to rewind time. It’s never a good idea to waste a good development skill, especially because I might need it later myself, you never know. Also, this situation wasn’t particularly serious.

I gave it some thought — for what it’s worth — and decided to tell the truth. It’s common knowledge, isn’t it, that nobody believes the truth if it sounds improbable enough.

“I teleported,” I said.

“You call this teleportation?” Professor replied in all seriousness. “I used to have a friend back in Odessa. He has this thing going: he’d buy a couple of bottles of the cheapest port and take a Znamenka train. At the time, there weren’t that many checks on the line. He’d drink the port and board the train, and in about ten minutes, he’d be fast asleep. And as soon as he woke up, he’d get off at the next station, whatever it was. A village or a big city — he just didn’t care. He’d just walk around and look at the local sights. That’s teleporting for you! You fall asleep in one place and wake up somewhere totally different. Listen, Sergei, you don’t happen to have a fifty-ruble note[5] on you, do you?”

I grinned and reached into my inventory for the Iorolfin brandy I’d pilfered from Traug’s uncle. He could have it, I didn’t care. I had no spare time for drinking, anyway. Let Professor appreciate it.

“That’s for you,” I said. “For your personal consumption.”

“Where did you take it out from? Was it in your pocket?”

“Yeah, that’s right. In my pocket.”

Professor unscrewed the top. His nostrils quivered. “It’s Armenian, isn’t it[6]?”

“Oh please. It’s much more than that.”

“French?”

“You could say so, I suppose.”

“Listen Sergei, a good drink requires good company. Fancy sharing one with me?”

“No, sorry, I gotta dash. Too many things to do.”

“I’ll have to go see Simon, then. He may be a working-class guy but he can appreciate a noble spirit.”

On that note, we parted ways.

It may have been nothing but it did improve my mood somewhat. I even managed to write a long and heartfelt (or so I thought) text to Julia, apologizing for last night among other things, and promising to make it up to her.

I received her reply, complete with another invitation to see her parents. This time, she suggested we do it “properly”, without undue haste, and touch all the bases including a “nice dinner”. I was obliged to consent.

As I approached the Community, I came across a janitor shoveling snow who seemed to watch me too close for comfort. I even turned round

just to double-check, but he was a regular commoner, not a Player. Then again, why would that surprise me? He probably knew all of the house dwellers, that's why he was so surprised to see me walk confidently through the yard. Not that I cared. I had more important things to worry about.

Litius was already in the Syndicate waiting for me. Literally waiting, with no trace of alcohol around him. Neither Traug nor Arts were there.

"Sergei, I know how to do it," he said confidently, rising to greet me.

"Where are the others?" I asked, offering him my hand.

"Traug's still asleep. As for that bad-mannered girl, I don't have the slightest idea. That's irrelevant, anyway. Sergei, I know! I know how to level you up to Illustrious."

"Tell me."

"It's all here," he said, pointing at the mission board and drawing me closer to it.

The board was quite a sight. It was completely covered with pieces of paper now. A lot of them were new ones.

Slayer (also known as the Red Horseman)

According to the available information, his development branch is Nimbler.

Mission from the Order of Guards

Charged with: the killing of great numbers of both Players and commoners

Sentence: death

Location: Italy

Reward: 5 kilos of dust

Austerius (also known as the Black Horseman)

According to the available information, his development branch is Disabler.

Mission from the Order of Guards

Charged with: the killing of great numbers of both Players and commoners

Sentence: death

Location: Italy

Reward: 5 kilos of dust

Omega (also known as the Pale Horseman)

According to the available information, her development branch is Pyrolizer.

Mission from the Order of Guards

Charged with: the killing of great numbers of both Players and commoners

Sentence: death

Location: Italy

Reward: 5 kilos of dust

Transporting snapdrakes from Czechia to Sweden

Mission from the Order of Drivers

Required: drive a herd of twenty snapdrakes to Sweden.

Location: Brno

Reward: 400 grams

Ingredients for the Potion of Insight

Mission form the Order of Seers

Required: find ten plants of holly, can-dock, day lily and relium tails.

Reward: 1200 grams

Dragon food

Mission from the Order of Drivers

Required: deliver thirty buffaloes or mountain goats for the dragons' consumption.

Location: Aktobe

Reward: 600 grams

They had a whole wallful of this paraphernalia, as if the Cesspit mission market was going through the roof. You name any kind of mission — it was there. But the strangest thing was, most of the bits of paper were already dark to some extent. Apart from those about the Horsemen, that is.

“How many of them are—”

“They’ve already moved all flybacks and snapdrakes from Italy and the entire Mediterranean coast to make sure that neither the Horsemen nor their minions have fast transportation available. Now the Guards under the Seers’ guidance are feeling out the area trying to locate them.”

“With any success?”

“If they had some Arakhian soul crystals, it would go much quicker. As it is, they have to use commoners’ gadgets. CCTV cameras, if I’m not mistaken.”

“You aren’t. Are all the Gates closed?”

“Well, as you well understand, the Gatekeepers still allow Players to use them, provided their karmas don’t prohibit their choice of destinations. But it’s true that all the Gatehouses are very closely guarded. Some rumors claim that they even hire commoners with army experience.

I shook my head. “It’s gonna be one hell of a scramble.”

Litius nodded. “Provided we stay.”

“I see you can’t wait to leg it!” a voice said behind our backs. “Somewhere with seas deep enough to accommodate all the fish you can eat!”

“Oh, she’s back,” Litius said, frowning.

“Hi, Arts,” I turned toward her. “Where have you been?”

“Just visiting some family. So what have you got here?”

“Well, Litius here thinks that if I drive that herd of snapdrakes to Sweden, I might become Illustrious.”

“For whom, for the snapdrakes? Or for everyone?”

“P-p-please! You all are l-l-looking at the wrong one!” Litius started losing his patience.

I motioned Arts to stop because I could see she was itching for a squabble. “So what do you want us to look at?” I asked amicably.

“Here,” Litius poked his paw at the notice at the very edge of the board.

Beholder

Mission from the ruler of the city of Brem

Charged with: killing 20 commoners and Players

Sentence: death

Proof of completion: an eye

Location: northwest of Brem, Singing Cave

Reward: 900 grams

That’s right. Now I remembered. This mission had gone live just as I’d received my title of Syndicate Messenger. But while I harbored some kind of nostalgia of the fact, Arts was much more vocal about it.

“Are you raving mad? It takes a good dozen Players to catch a beholder! Or a couple of professional drivers from central world. Meeting one is basically signing your own death sentence!”

“Th-th-there are cert-t-tain risk-k-ks,” Litius began apologetically.

“Certain risks? The Beholder will devour us the moment our eyes meet his! He’s one of the most powerful mental creatures...”

“I beg to differ! There’re some beings that inhabit the province of Khar in Coragosh...”

“I don’t give a shit about the province of Khar!” the girl got all worked up.

“Arts, please, would you go and sit down?” I butted in because heads had already started turning in our direction. “Go get yourself a drink. *Go sit down*, I said!”

With a defiant glare, she sniffed and walked pointedly toward the farthest table. Never mind. One less thing to worry about. Easier on Litius, too. I could tell because he’d even stopped stuttering.

“Brem has an active trade route with Rhetnor. That’s how the city makes a living. The Singing Cave is right next to the highway, which was why when the Beholder had invaded it, he started attacking — first random travelers, and then he moved on to merchants. Gradually, the caravans were forced to abandon the direct route and take a detour via Skirtsville. But that’s a real dog’s leg. Merchants lose their money, and all perishable goods — well, perish. Whoever has any contact with Players, hires them to be able to travel by Gates. But that costs.”

“In other words, if we get rid of the problem, the denizens of Bern would be eternally grateful?”

“And not just them. The inhabitants of Rhetnor, too. Which makes it the fastest way to rush your karma quick.”

“The fastest, yes, but also the most dangerous,” I said. “As far as I understand, Brem city guards had failed to control the Beholder.”

“That’s where Arts is right. He’s an incredibly dangerous opponent. The ruler of Brem could have hired some experienced Players, I suppose, but as far as I gathered, he’s a bit short for cash. Which plays right in our hands.”

“What does? All I have is a toy crossbow and a wonderwaffle with an empty clip. Plus a toothpick of a knife and a Katzbalger, neither of them any good really. So how do you expect me to kill him?”

“Are you sure we need to kill him?” Litius said philosophically. “Being the creatures of Earth, Beholders like primeval forests, not flippin’ caves. If he decided to settle down there, he must have a reason for it. And if we find out what it is, we just might reestablish the trade route between the two cities. I have a plan — and you are going to play the lead part.”

It took Litius all of five minutes to share his plan with us. Really, the guy was missing his vocation. He should have gone into politics. He made it sound so convincing that in the end, even I began to believe in his plan’s success. All we had to do now was persuade the other two.

Arts was quite a piece of work. She said, among other things, that we were two brave monkeys with a hand grenade. Still, once she’d realized that we weren’t going to abandon the idea, she grudgingly agreed, even though I had a funny feeling she reserved the right to differ.

As for Traug, once we’d made it over to his place, I don’t think he even understood what we wanted from him. Rubbing his face puffy with drunken sleep, he threw some clothes on, steered a half-naked girl out the door, took a swig from a jug and announced he was ready.

I spent another twenty minutes waiting for him to have his hangover fix which picked him up nicely, then gathered my gang and explained the whole scheme to them again. Traug kept asking if it was true we weren’t going to fight the “bug-eyes monster” but in the end, he agreed to the plan saying that “there’re some smarter guys in this room”. Still, he warned us

that if things got out of control he would smear the said Beholder all over the cave wall nice and thin.

“So, if you don’t mind, that’s what we’ll do,” I said, climbing to my feet. “But before we go to Purgator, I still have one urgent business here in Cesspit.”

“Two, even,” Litius corrected me.

“Okay, two, but they’re virtually in the same place. So I suggest we go there first, and from there we’ll go and help our Purg friends. Any objections?”

“No,” Traug said, slowly shaking his head. “Where d’you wanna go?”

“I’d like to take Vreig at his word and see Adjeena. She lives in Istanbul, doesn’t she?”

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Chapter 15

THE WHOLE WORLD lies at our feet — provided we make an effort. Take someone who's spent their entire life in their abode in the sticks and has never ventured beyond the local shop. But the nearest airport is only a short drive away, isn't it? All they need to do is choose a destination and the plane will spirit them to any corner of the world. Paris is only a few thousand miles away. And if they head east, hello Tokyo.

The world is so rich and diverse, it makes no sense locking yourself up in the concrete jungle of your home city. I had to become a Player to realize this — and even then only when Lady Luck had issued me a winning ticket. The Players were free from a great many problems and inconveniences typical for commoners. We didn't have to wait in check-in lines and hang around in departure lounges only to squeeze our backsides into tiny economy class seats with no legroom worth mentioning. We had Gates. You threw a pinch of dust into the bowl and hey presto, you were several thousand miles away from home. Instant transportation, no online check-in required.

And when your friends pay your fare, then it's almost a dream come true. Who would say no to a free ride to the glorious city of Istanbul? Not me, that's for sure. Especially considering the fact that the trip offered me a chance to upgrade my weapons. And I had everything on hand for just such an occasion — well, not literally on hand, of course, but in my inventory.

"So where to now?" Traug asked, exiting the Istanbul Gatehouse.

"Judging by the map," I said, fiddling with my cell phone, "we need to take a little walk. About half a mile in that direction."

Having lost patience, I just switched to my interface and activated the Game's navigator. It was much more reliable than a human map.

All things considered, we'd been lucky. The Players' Community was located at the city's tourist center. Which seemed to have more tourist attractions per square mile than Bumpkin had recipes. That also led to some of the inconveniences: mainly, that I couldn't really get into the right mood, being surrounded by a crowd of Brits, Germans, Russians (mainly Russians) but precious few Turks.

So in the end, I got mixed impressions: yes, the place was pretty, well-cared for, a little too hectic, but it still felt a bit theatrical. We walked past a cluster of gray minarets which my phone map proudly identified as "the Blue Mosque", down a busy street (I could only imagine what it was like here in summer months!) and continued unhurriedly past squat brick houses, none of them more than three stories high. Still, these weren't the battered three-story graybricks of my home city crumbling with age: these were nice and neat, as if the sole reason of their existence was to allow tourists to take pictures of themselves against their backdrop. The houses held a multitude of cafes, coffee shops, souvenir stalls and groceries.

Finally, we reached the park. Had it not been for a translucent wave which seemed to be pushing me in the right direction, we might have even entered it, because the road took a sharp bend just there. The houses here were higher and newer, and although their ground floors accommodated ever more shops and restaurants, the top floors seemed to be reserved for human habitation.

We passed a small restaurant with a sonorous name, Cappadocia, and turned off into a side lane so narrow that had I spread my arms wide, I'd have touched its opposite walls. It was this lane which brought us to a small inner yard which was our final destination.

"All we've got left to do is find that Adjeena woman," Traug grumbled.

"Well, she's not a needle in a haystack, is she? I don't think it's such a problem to find a Player in a single building."

I studied the six-story house. It would be stupid to go door to door asking “You don’t know a Player lady who lives here, do you? No, I can’t describe her. No, I don’t know how tall she is.”

Still, today Lady Luck seemed to have smiled on its hapless protégé. Talk about the devil. Adjeena wasn’t exactly a devil — rather, a stout woman with a frowned gaze and a watering can in her right hand, probably intending to water the potted plants by the front door.

Adjeena appeared to be very special — or if the truth were known, downright ugly. You know the feeling when you ride a bus and just can’t take your eyes off some girl’s face because she’s so incredibly beautiful and her face is so unique? Here, it was the same, only in reverse. I just couldn’t take my eyes off her large aquiline nose, her heavy brow, her huge mouth and sagging cheeks. Add to this her impressive masculine frame — and still it had to be her, without a shadow of a doubt. Even her development branch fitted: ***Gemmologist***.

“Hello.”

“Hello yourself. Who are you?”

“I’m Serge. My name’s Serge.”

“So what do you want?”

I produced my Katzbalger. She gave it a quick expert look. She didn’t even need to hold it to pronounce her verdict:

“I don’t do remodeling.”

“Why remodeling?”

“Because it’s very badly balanced. They used to make swords like this before. Looks like Kabirid workmanship to me. They make them much

better these days.”

I remembered the state the sword had been in, as well as the name of the province in its name. So apparently, the mysterious Roin Province was in Firoll, the home world of Kabirids.

“No, thanks. All I need it to have it inlaid... or how d’you call this sort of thing... basically, I need to attach a stone to it,” I produced the Fragment of Khvarn I’d received from Morbian’s dead body.

Adjeena’s ugly face brightened: I seemed to have piqued her interest.

“That’s not a stone,” she said. “I’m not asking you how you laid your hands on Khvarn mica. You’ll either lie to me — which I can tell straight away — or you just won’t tell me. How d’you know me?”

“Your name is well-known in Cesspit. You’re one of the greatest masters of your trade.”

“Stupid little liar,” she swung round and headed back into the building.

[∞]

“I heard about you from a friend.”

“Who’s that?”

“A Purg from Skirtsville. His name is Bruno.”

With a subtle motion of her hand, she emptied her watering can over me. “Little liar.”

[∞]

“Who’s that?”

“Vreig.”

No idea why I told her the truth. It was as if something invisible pressed down on me. If I lied, it would have dropped down and crushed me.

At least Adjeena gave a nod, satisfied. “So you think I’m gonna help you if I know you’ve been sent here by that old fox?”

“He didn’t send me here at all,” I said indignantly. “This so-called old fox owes us money. So he gave us your address in payment of his debt.”

I don’t think I’d ever enjoyed telling the truth so much. I could literally sense the pleasure of moral satisfaction. This wasn’t right. Was I sick? Should I take my temperature, maybe?

“And how much did he owe you?” Adjeena asked with a knowing squinted look.

“About two kilos.”

“Consider yourselves lucky,” she finally set her watering can on the ground. “The things he told me, that lying shit! Said he was head over heels in love with me. Said he couldn’t live without me. He offered me to move with him to Vvet which is the other side of the central worlds. And I was stupid enough to believe him. Why not, I thought. How about I live a proper life for a change? Get married and have some children...” she paused, then continued with a defiant smirk, “With a face like mine, yeah right. Fat chance! You remember, girl,” she looked at Arts, then shifted her gaze to me and Traug. “You should never believe what men say. Especially when they’re handsome. So basically, he fleeced me. He had me for every grain of dust I’d had. Just shy of thirty kilos.”

My throat turned dry. *“How much?”*

“All my savings I’d been putting away since Atatürk. I used to have three apprentices, you know. You’ve no idea what it was like in those days when three swordsmiths obeyed a woman. I lost everything, every single bit of it. I was so sorry for myself, so wallowing in pity I was, that I was seriously considering taking my own life. Then I just started working, bit by bit. Out on the street at first, by the Community, then I rented a workshop right next to it. And now I’ve bought myself a house. Players come to me themselves, not vice versa.”

“This whole house is yours?”

“All of it,” Adjeena said with pride. “I only rent the ground floor out front to some commoner shopkeepers. But even so, I don’t see them, all the dealings are done through a middle man. Otherwise they too might start wondering how a poor woman like me could afford it. So you could say I almost live a life of pleasure now.”

Still, the look in her eyes didn’t exactly belong to a happy woman. Not that I’m a specialist in happy women, you know. But I thought that their eyes radiated some kind of inner light — and Adjeena had the tired gaze of someone who’d been living for so long that nothing could really surprise them.

“Right, did you say inlay?” she sharply changed the subject. “Give it to me.”

With the expert hand of a jeweler swordsmith, she took the Katzbalger and the fragment of Khvarn from me. She weighed each in her palm, studied the precious mica, then announced her verdict:

“It’s complicated but it won’t take long. Touch me. Don’t worry, I’m not gonna seduce you.”

I gently touched her hand.

Several pictures of my sword appeared before my eyes — the improved versions, its hilt decorated with various choices of gemstones. Each image had its own design and varied in pattern and its density, which in turn affected each item’s stats:

Slayer. Black Imperial Katzbalger

Origin: Roin Province

Material: Roin steel

Charmed to increase the damage dealt to positive-karma Players. The higher the karma, the bigger the damage dealt. Each blow removes two of your opponent’s Mantles.

Cost of modification: 500 grams

Sting. Black Imperial Katzbalger

Origin: Roin Province

Material: Roin steel

Charmed to increase the damage dealt to positive-karma Players. The higher the karma, the bigger the damage dealt. Pierces any Light or Medium armor with one blow.

Cost of modification: 500 grams

Avenger. Black Imperial Katzbalger

Origin: Roin Province

Material: Roin steel

Charmed to increase the damage dealt to positive-karma Players. The higher the karma, the bigger the damage dealt. Bonus: doubles your Blocking ability in combat.

Cost of modification: 800 grams

Indestructible. Black Imperial Katzbalger

Origin: Roin Province

Material: Roin steel

Charmed to increase the damage dealt to positive-karma Players. The higher the karma, the bigger the damage dealt. Immune to all attacks by Pyrolysis and Necro Magic.

Cost of modification: 500 grams

Oh Gods. Removing *two* Mantles in one blow? But this was... this was...

My eyes glistened wetly. I felt a lump in my throat. My nerves were getting the better of me. Then again, Avenger was worth every ounce of its 800 grams.

Still, my Intuition focused my attention on the last modification. Pyrolysis... the word seemed to ring a bell. Where had I heard it before? Or... seen it before?

The image of the mission message board flashed through my mind, the handwritten word “pyrolizer”... but of course! That’s what I should take, then.

Without exiting the weapon modification mode, I checked my interface. I had 445 grams. Plus I still had to buy an item with a bonus to

Sorcery, as per Litius' plan. What could I do?

I let go of Adjeena's hand. The images of the swords disappeared.

"What is it, sweetheart?" she asked, surprised.

"I'm afraid I have a bit of a problem. I'm a bit short of the right sum."

"Honey, I've already given you a big discount. Because we're comrades in misery, the two of us. Any cheaper would be charity, and I don't do charity. I know my work's worth."

"Shit. Guys, anyone have half a kilo? I'll pay it back soon... maybe."

Arts gave a guilty shrug, like, sorry man, can't help you.

Litius shook his head too. He must have felt bad about it because he hurried to add, "I sent all the money to Ullum."

Traug alone hadn't lost his usual cheer. He walked over to me and handed me a hefty pouch.

"Ruddy-faced ladies have always been my type," he told Adjeena. "They seem to have this primeval force about them. Just sayin'."

"Cool it, will ya? I have big reservations about Korls now. But wait a sec... have we met before? Your face is sort of familiar."

A cold shiver ran down my spine. Traug's family ties coming to light was the last thing I needed. She had a point: he indeed bore a slight resemblance to his uncle. So I decided to interfere:

"All Korls look the same to a human, do we?"

Adjeena gave me a long look. An invisible steel band seemed to constrict my head. My breathing seized; my throat went dry. I could swear she was the one who was doing it. But how?

“We’re being a bit evasive, are we?” she said. “Don’t try to game me, sweetheart. I have a nose for these things.”

“How?” I croaked.

“When you make it to Master in Eloquence, you too will have a small bag of your own tricks. So, mister, you’re related to that old fox, are you?”

Traug looked at her like a cornered mouse looks at the cat. His gaze was filled with hopelessness — and he didn’t have the slightest chance to lie his way out of this one. “I... I’m his nephew.”

“Nephew? Well, it’s even better this way.”

I could have sworn that right at that moment she’d stumbled upon an idea.

“I need an assistant,” Adjeena said, “in order to work on the sword. You seem perfect. That’s it,” she added, turning to me. “Now give me the money and come back in a couple of hours.”

She gave Traug a long close look and added, “Make it three hours. So which sword have you chosen?”

“Indestructible,” I said unhesitantly.

She nodded, took the dust, the sword and the fragment of Khvarn, and thumped back into the house. As she entered, she paused and motioned Traug to follow her as in, *move along, chop chop*.

“What are we supposed to do now?” Arts asked once we’d been left alone.

“Same as everybody does when they get here. We’re gonna chill out.”

We walked out of the courtyard onto the street and kept going until we came to a high wall to our right which separated the park from the city. We stumbled upon a currency exchange booth which looked suspect to say the least, but they were perfectly honest with us. There, Arts changed twenty dollars to liras, and we found a café to splurge it in. The fabled Turkish coffee they served us turned out to be some instant swill but at least the waiter was super courteous.

“I could get used to this,” I said, sipping the hot coffee. “Istanbul in the morning, Moscow at lunchtime, Los Angeles by night... There are Gates in America, are there?”

Arts nodded. “Sure. Not as many as in Latin America though, for some reason. Having said that, I’ve never been past New York City. Just didn’t happen.”

“Traveling is a fad,” Litius said softly, sipping some water. He must have decided to give his body a cleanse after all the drinking he’d done with Traug. “It’s a product of our time.”

I just shrugged, unwilling to argue. If traveling was a fad, it was a mighty cool one. Beats shopping every time. Just change some dollars and euros, take a stroll down the Gatehouse — and there you are, sipping pineapple juice by the ocean. Even money wasn’t really a problem because as a Player, you had to try really hard to be broke. The only thing harder than that was to stay alive.

“There, look,” Arts said, pointing outside.

Something strange was going on there. A dark spot flashed past the window. It was only thanks to my Sharp Eye and Observation Skills that I recognized it as a snapdrake with a rider. They were chased by a couple of dozen motorbikes. I couldn't see the bikers' faces concealed behind their helmets and bandanas, but they seemed to be serious, by the looks of it. Otherwise, why would they have weapons on them?

I turned to my friends. "What the hell was that?"

"N-n-normally, I'm av-v-verse to p-p-panic but th-th-this doesn't look g-g-good."

A powerful explosion no more than three hundred yards away confirmed his suspicions. The window panes rattled; the coffee cups clinked; my heart fluttered. We looked at each other.

No, I had no desire to go and check what was going on. Quite the opposite.

"I suggest we cut our sightseeing short," I said.

"You wanna go back to Adjeena?" Arts half-asked, half-suggested.

"It might be a very good idea."

We paid and left. Strangely enough, the street was virtually devoid of commoners. Less than half an hour ago, we'd had to elbow our way through the crowds and now they were all gone. In one of Istanbul's most touristy areas, of all places. I had a very bad feeling about it all.

"You think it's Deflection?" Arts asked Litius.

"Or Aversion."

"What's that?" I asked.

“They are very powerful spells against commoners,” Arts replied. “Or rather, for commoners. To make sure they don’t get in the way. Personally, I’d never have enough mana for one of those.”

“N-n-neither would I.”

“Does that mean that someone doesn’t want to hurt them?”

“Or just to make sure they don’t find out there’s something going on. Someone who doesn’t want to attract attention. In which case they won’t want to leave any witnesses among Players, either.”

My heart missed a bit. “That’s not good.”

“No, it’s not.”

“No, you don’t understand. I don’t mean it, like, figuratively. I mean it literally. Take a look over there,” I pointed at the far end of the street.

A Player was running toward us. He was covered in blood all over. He was followed by three fit men clad in bulletproof vests over their black clothes.

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Chapter 16

THE SUBJECT OF HELPING your neighbor is a bit slippery at the best of times. Gone are the Supermen and Superwomen who'd dash to answer the slightest plea for help. These days, a lot of us live by the old adage, "see no evil, hear no evil". It's quite understandable, for a number of reasons. You don't want a knife slipped between his ribs as you try to break up a drunken fight. Or stand up for a battered wife only to be berated by her for hitting her beloved husband. In other words, we aren't very willing to go looking for trouble if we can avoid it. That's probably why so many turn a blind eye to the injustice around. Better safe than sorry. The very thought that one day something might happen to you and no one will hurry to your help seems to evade them.

I didn't have many reservations about whether to help the wounded Player or not — because the moment he'd seen us, he'd beelined for us, and so did his pursuers. I decided against waiting for them to attack just for the pleasure of later claiming it had been self-defense. When you systematically get roughed up by a number of individuals, you'd be forgiven for developing a less pacifist outlook.

I still don't know how I'd ended up with the crossbow in my hands. My mind cleared the moment I loosed off the bolt. One of the pursuers stumbled and dropped face down onto the ground.

Your Shooting skill has increased to level 29.

Still, my opponents were professionals. The one to the right from the one I'd hit threw his hand in the air. A phantom spear materialized in his grip, which seemed to be woven of bolts of lightning. My backside could already sense it coming for me, about to reduce me to a teaspoon of dust in a matchbox-sized coffin.

[∞]

My finger gently squeezed the trigger. The bolt twanged its deadly song through the air.

Your Shooting skill has increased to level 29.

Before I'd even gotten the chance to see the message, my brain jumped into a frenzy. Trying to attack him with single spells was pointless: I was pretty sure he had a Veil on. What did that leave me? A Bloody Whip? By the time I'd taken him apart, he'd disintegrate me. Combat Telekinesis? Why not? Even though it wouldn't kill him, at least it might ruin his hairstyle.

All this had flashed through my mind within a split second. By the time the first wounded attacker had dropped onto the cold Turkish sidewalk, my hand shot out as if on its own accord. The other Player had only just started casting his spell. I watched the phantom spear shaft materialize out of thin air, the tiny electric charges reaching out to it, heating up its tip...

Then it was all over.

Your Mysticism skill has increased to level 7.

The spear disintegrated before it was fully formed. The Player flew back a good twenty feet, hitting his head real hard. I even got the impression that his vertebrae snapped with the impact.

You've taken the first step toward acquiring the Empathy ability.

You've saved the life of a Commoner who is neutral to you.

+100 karma points. Current level: +2180. You gravitate to the Light Side.

I didn’t get the chance to celebrate my promotion through the ESP ranks — because the third attacker had already trained his short assault rifle on me. Even If I’d had five Blanket spells cast on me, they wouldn’t have saved me.

Luckily for me, I wasn’t a lone hero — which is more than I can say about Bruce Willis. I didn’t have to jump out of my skin and dance on broken glass, trying to defeat the enemy on my own. I had Arts, didn’t I?

A pillar of fire rose from under the ground. My attacker’s brief burst of flame wheezed through the air overhead. The street filled with screaming and shouting, The fire disappeared just as unexpectedly as it had arrived — but it had left the guy no chance of surviving it.

In one powerful leap that only catmen could perform, Litius landed on top of the fallen enemy. A brief swing of his paw; the crunching sound of the broken vertebrae; then it was all over.

Now the street was littered with Players, including the wounded one who’d sought our help. I must have missed the moment when he’d collapsed. In any case, his body hadn’t disintegrated which meant he was still alive. Ditto for everybody else on the scene.

“Arts, will you please check on him?” Having said that, I drew my knife and headed toward our defeated pursuers.

This wasn’t cruelty, just cold-minded calculation. Any enemy who was wounded but not finished off, will come back and bite you. I might not even be here — but someone else will, some defenseless Player. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not Mother Theresa — I just don’t want to breed lawlessness and entropy in our world.

“He’s d-d-dead,” Litius said, looking up at me.

“In that case, why hasn’t he disappeared?”

“He’s a commoner. Here, look,” Litius picked up an amulet hanging around the dead man’s neck and handed it to me.

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I know what you’re thinking. Very informative. I might tattoo this message on my skin. Might work well in the absence of Chinese characters.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“My best guess would be that it’s an amulet,” Litius said, calming down. “Most likely something that counters Aversion.”

“Do Players use commoners?” I asked in surprise.

“When the Players are few but they have plenty of both money and magic powers — why not?”

I could still hear the loud explosions in the distance but by now, there was no shooting worth mentioning. The fight seemed to be subsiding. Litius ripped the amulet off the chest of the second attacker and broke his neck in one smooth motion.

“You can’t allow your karma to drop right now,” he explained.

He didn’t make it to the last victim — because that one was neither dead nor wounded. It had taken me all this time to realize it. I’d initially ID’d him as a Player, simply because a commoner can’t cast spells, surely? They can resist them, provided they have the right amulet, but they can’t use magic!

But now this last enemy, who'd only a moment ago been enjoying the winter sun of Istanbul, had disappeared — only to reappear about twenty paces away from us and vanish again, materializing even further away. It had only taken him a couple seconds. Apparently, I wasn't the only one capable of microporting.

Any other Player in my place wouldn't have been able to do anything about it. But I wasn't any other Player.

[∞]

I wasn't really sure if it would work. I didn't want to just knock him off his feet: I wanted the blast to press down on him like the body of water weighs down a reckless diver who'd ventured too deep. Still, it worked like a dream. And if you remember that no one but me had seen our enemy's hilarious but effective retreat attempt, it worked like magic — literally.

The Player vanished as soon as Litius had started for him, and duly reappeared about twenty paces away from us, only to be stunned by a Combat Telekinesis which hit him like a ton of bricks. His head jerked as if he was a ragdoll; his body went limp.

Your Mysticism skill has increased to level 8.

I drew my knife and warily approached him. A **Thunder Master**. He was lying on his back with his arms spread wide.

I removed his helmet. He was a human: a middle-aged man, lanky and fit, who looked dangerous even in his helpless state.

For the first time in my life I sensed a craving for his death. I was like a man-eater shark who had smelled blood and darted toward the wounded swimmer. My hand closed around the knife with a new confidence and went up in the air on its own accord, raising the knife above his head.

“Player!”

It took me some time to realize it was meant for me. Before I could turn around, the voice repeated, much louder this time:

“Player!”

I snapped out of my nightmarish daze. I had a problem explaining to myself what I was doing standing on one knee over an unconscious guy knife in hand.

Meanwhile, a Guard was hurrying toward us along the street, almost breaking into a run. Although his black mask was devoid of emotion, his body language betrayed anxiety. I scrambled back to my feet and put the knife away.

That seemed to have calmed him down somewhat. He slowed down and walked over to me unhurriedly.

“What happened here?” he asked in a calm level voice.

At first I wanted to say something sarcastic but promptly realized that cracking jokes while facing a cop’s nightstick wasn’t such a healthy idea. Nightsticks can hurt, you know.

“Those three over here tried to kill that one over there,” I pointed at the Player with Arts leaning over him administering first aid. “Two of the attackers were commoners, and they’re dead. The third one was a Player. He’s unconscious.”

The guard leaned over the guy who’d been unlucky to chance upon the receiving end of my Combat Telekinesis, and lifted his head in his hands, “scanning” him. Then he turned back to me.

“He’s got concussion.”

“Not guilty,” I tried to explain. “You should have watched them better. Or did you expect us to stand and watch him trying to kill us?”

The Guard didn’t reply. He cast some kind of spell, conjuring up an elastic cocoon of a pale lilac color which enveloped the Player’s head like a pressurized helmet. I had a funny feeling it wasn’t meant to heal his concussion: more likely, it had put him into an induced sleep. The Guard paused, as if conferring with Cosmos, then added in a low voice:

“If your story is found to be true, we’ll have no more questions for you.”

He walked over to the attackers’ victim and exchanged a few words with Arts, nodding his satisfaction. While they were talking, a few more Guards arrived with a snapdrake. They loaded the dead bodies and the sleeping Player on its back, while the first Guard picked up the wounded victim in his arms.

“Follow me.”

So follow him we did. What else were we supposed to do? Unfortunately (or luckily), we had to walk back into the community. Several Guards on snapdrakes dashed past; even more were on foot.

Soon we started coming across commoners. Their numbers kept growing until the street was bustling with life once again. We reached the familiar gray minarets and arrived at the welcoming doors of the Community.

“Follow me, please, all of you,” the Guard said, heading for one of the two-story houses.

Judging by the sheer numbers of the sentries posted there, I realized it must have been the Sachem’s residence. I tried to calm down — because there’s nothing worse than a nervous leader — and waved for my friends to

approach. Arts was keeping her cool too — but as for Litius, his hackles were literally up.

“W-w-we haven’t d-d-d-one anything wrong, have w-w-we?”

“No, we haven’t, fish eater. Just relax.”

Our Guard exchanged a few words with one of the sentries who let us in. Only now did I understand why they call Istanbul the pearl of the Orient. Whether the local Sachem dabbled at smuggling or just had an itchy palm, but the place was literally bathed in splendor. The rugs under our feet were definitely handmade and had never seen a thread of polypropylene. And the chandelier overhead wasn’t one of those cheap and nasty plastic affairs: its lead content must have been dangerously high, judging by the precious glint of every one of its crystal prisms. And the paintings on the walls... they were none of the inept daubery that passes for art these days, when they need to explain to you what the painting is about in order to understand it. These pictures here were real art: landscapes, animals, portraits — and according to my Intuition, they were all originals.

Apparently, the Sachem’s position in Istanbul was nothing to sniff at. Poor bastard! He probably complained he had too much caviar for breakfast.

In the end, Litius didn’t have to be so jittery. The Guard gave the Sachem a brief run-down of the situation, with a generous (too generous, in my opinion) addition of “according to these three here” and “as they seem to claim”. After which the Sachem simply lost all interest. Yet another Guard walked out of the gloom — he must have been lurking in the room all the time. Despite his black mask, I immediately recognized him as an Abbas. Their feet are turned out in a most weird way, forcing Abbases to swing their arms to support each step.

They took my friends to another room and began interrogating me. They did it by the book, unhurriedly and meticulously, repeating the same questions over and over again, just rewording them slightly. I knew straight

away they were trying to trip me. You never know, they even might have succeeded in the end, had yours truly been indeed lying to them. As it was, I passed the test with flying colors, judging by the reactions of the Abbas judge who kept nodding. After that, they grilled Arts in the same way, and finally, Litius.

They'd spent almost an hour on us — the bulk of that time taken by Litius' stuttering. Eventually even I was getting a bit jumpy at the sound of his c-c-constant st-st-st-stammer. Still, everything comes to an end, bad things as well as good ones. Finally, they were done with us.

"The Order of Guards has no more questions for you," the Sachem said with a benign nod. "You're free to go."

"An apology would have been nice," I said once we were outside. (You didn't expect me to say it in the Sachem's face, did you? I'm not a masochist, you know.) "All that time wasted because of them!"

"Oh please. They could have kept us there much longer had they really wanted to. Like, pending an investigation. Can't you see what's going on?"

She was dead right there. By now, the Community resembled a garrison preparing for a visit from a Defense Minister. The place was a flurry of activity, and we were an isle of calm within its midst, sticking out like three sore thumbs wondering what to do with ourselves.

"Seeing as we have some time and we're here anyway, we might just as well start thinking about buying something we really need," Litius said, completely recomposed by now.

"What do you mean?" Arts asked curiously.

"That's for our friend the Beholder. When I see it, I'll show it to you. Anyone know where we can find a spell modifier?"

Apparently, no one did. We had to find one by scientific trial and error. A quarter of an hour later, after we'd "accidentally" all but entered the Syndicate twice, we were finally standing opposite a three-story house. This wasn't really a shop: more like a large department store.

One of the Players monitoring the large room hurried toward us. "Hi, how can I help you today?"

The shop was indeed impressive. They'd pulled down all the non-loadbearing partition walls, turning the whole inside of the house into a single room and transforming doors into high archways. The walls were lined with display cabinets filled with all kinds of amulets, rings, chains, brooches, even earrings.

I chuckled. Of course. Seeing as women wore earrings anyway, it made sense to charm them too. You probably didn't even notice wearing them, and having an extra bonus didn't hurt. I even wondered how I might look in a pair of those, but promptly eschewed the idea.

"No, it's okay, we're just looking around," I repeated the phrase Litius had told me to say.

Our dear catman had already pointed out to us that Turks were doomed to remain Turks even after they became Players. Meaning that they loved nothing better than to sell you something you didn't need in the first place. And considering their natural aptitude for Eloquence, every shopkeeper in the Community was a master in Commerce. Which meant that under no circumstance could we show our interest in their wares. At least that's what Litius had told me. And I had wisely put my trust into him.

"All the jewelry is on the first floor," the shop assistant said. "The armor is up on the second floor. The weapons on the top floor. We have a better selection than some of the central worlds!"

"You surely don't mean that your crossbows are better than those sold in Smithery?" I asked pensively, studying a gold-plated bracelet which

had more gemstones than stats.

“Well, I wouldn’t say they’re better,” the vendor said without batting an eyelid, “but our siege crossbows are very decent quality too.”

“We’ll call you when we need you,” I said, making it clear our exchange was over.

Still, he didn’t get the message and kept trailing after us for a while, praising every item our eyes would chance upon. After about ten minutes, he must have gotten fed up because he finally let us be.

Arts cringed. “Is all this junk really for sale?”

“I’m quite speechless, too,” Litius agreed. “Their so-called charmed items are of rather mediocre quality. They just take any old trinket and add a couple of stats to it. Having said, that, I’ve just seen a ring with +9 to Acrobatics. Which means that we still have a chance to find something we could use. I want you to remember that items with bonuses to Sorcery are normally blue, so I’d like you to pay attention to all items of that color.”

“Where are the prices?” I asked, stopping by the Acrobatics ring he’d just mentioned.

“That’s just their way,” Arts replied. “They decide on the price when they see the buyer. Let’s split.”

Each of us walked the length of the display stands. I came across a couple of items which we, in theory, could use, but their bonuses were too small. Between them and my level-3 Sorcery, the result was lamentable. So I had no choice but to soldier on.

In the meantime, I made a very curious discovery. After a while, the shop assistant must have gotten used to our presence, to the point where he stopped minding us at all, and got talking to some of his regulars — or maybe his friends who’d popped in to check on him. From a few snapped

fragments of their conversation I'd gathered that the drivers' depot had been attacked by some Players assisted by commoner mercenaries. Luckily, they'd managed to repel the attack but several of the local Players had been killed. No idea who might have been behind it.

Or should I say, the vendor had no idea. Because to me, the whole thing was as clear as day.

After another half-hour of roaming the shop, I finally lost all hope, quite prepared to quit and leave. That's when Arts approached me, as if by accident.

"I think I've found it," she said in a low voice.

I startled. "Where did you see it?"

"Can you speak any louder? It's in the far corner by the window. I'll go there now and I want you and Litius to eventually join me there."

And that's what we did. After another ten minutes, Litius and I put on the bored expressions of two men who'd had enough shopping for the day, and walked over to Arts.

"To the right from the necklace."

That was the gaudiest signet ring that had ever graced my eye. A massive chunk of sterling silver topped with a stone of doubtful value. And it was green, not blue as Litius had described.

Signet Ring of Mountain Sorcerers

+8 to Sorcery

+3 to Resistance

Aha, so here was the answer as to the ring's color. The bonus to Sorcery lent the item a blue hue, but it also had a bonus to Resistance, resulting in a green color. Which meant that items with a bonus to Resistance had to be yellow. Oh well.

"So, what are your Commerce levels?" Arts said.

"Five," I admitted.

"Twenty-eight," Litius said, then added apologetically, "I don't consider such mundane skills worthy of leveling."

"I see. Apparently, I'll have to do your dirty work for you again... Sir? Excuse me? May I?"

The shop assistant who in his past human life had probably never been addressed as "sir", hurried anxiously toward us. Arts graced him with a smile and got talking nineteen to the dozen, transforming from a grim and serious young lady into a carefree chirruping little bird. What a metamorphosis!

"I just want something to give to a guy. He's my friend. I quite like that ring over there. How much does it cost?" to my surprise, Arts pointed at another piece of jewelry exhibited on a shelf nearby.

"Oh, that one! This is the Ring of Queen Tomyris. Don't you worry, it'll look just as exquisite on a man's hand. Remarkably fine artwork, isn't it? Ancient craftsmen! It's the only one of its kind in Cesspit.

I gave a mental shrug. Whatever. The ring was in fact quite average. It did have some inscription snaking along its rim though. Probably something like, *"Frodo, don't forget to turn right after Minas Morgul"*. Its stats were very modest. You'd have to pay me to accept it.

"It's only eight hundred grams," the vendor said to our astonishment.

“No, can’t afford it,” Arts said, then pointed at the one next to it. “How about this one?”

“Or, this is a wonderful specimen of ancient craftsmanship...”

And he went on and on and on. If you believed him, the ring used to belong to King Hammurabi himself. It was in fact priceless, but Arts had been lucky because only today and only for her the vendor was prepared to sell it for the symbolic sum of six hundred grams dust.

“No, I need something cheaper and not as ornate. How about this one?” she finally poked her finger at the right ring.

The vendor dissolved into another story, about mountain sorcerers this time, which Arts parried by saying she’d never heard about them. After a brief competition in Eloquence, they finally agreed on four hundred grams. That sounded more like the real thing. The thought that that trinket could help me level my karma and earn a bit more, made me feel a bit better. Provided everything went according to plan.

As we left the shop, I realized I had only 45 grams of dust left in my pocket. The only time I’d had less money on me was back at uni when I had to borrow some loose change for a hot dog. But now the fact made me even more uncomfortable. I wasn’t a teenage boy anymore. Still, the ring on my finger made me feel a bit happier.

The next one on our to-do list was a spell vendor. We’d checked three shops before we finally found the one we needed — and he was an Archalus to boot. Not because I had some kind of affinity with those feathered dudes — if anything, I hadn’t had much luck with them so far. It’s just that my fellow Korls had turned out even greedier and with higher Commerce stats than yours truly.

The Archalus listened to me and cringed. “An absolutely useless spell,” he said, “and the moment you take the ring off, it’ll stop working.

Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Depends on the price.”

“Well, how about a hundred and fifty grams? Only because it’s a modification.”

I turned to my friends. “Guys, how much do you have? I’ve got forty-five grams.”

Arts reached into her inventory, producing a small handful. “Thirty-two.”

“Sixty,” Litius said grimly, reaching for the money.

The Archalus chuckled. “Never mind. Give it here. Only because it’s a modification. Take this.”

He handed me a blue crystal. I hurried to absorb the spell.

Talking to Mysterious Creatures (Sorcery). Allows you to understand and control some non-sentient creatures of magic origin.

Use: on self

Cost: 100 mana

Duration: 30 seconds

“Thanks,” I flashed him a happy smile and hurried out. “All done! Let’s go get Traug, then we can head for Purgator.”

“There’s need to. Talk about the devil.”

Indeed, Traug was trudging toward us along the tourist street which led from the Community. He looked ruffled and disheveled, his eyes

forlorn. When he noticed us, he doubled his step but didn't look any happier. If anything, he grew even sadder.

"I thought you said you'd be back in three hours," he grumbled, handing me the sword.

I took it in my hands — and I couldn't help admiring it. I took a couple of swings. The sword was just too good. Now it lived up to its name.

"Sorry man, we've been a bit busy here. So did you manage to help her?"

"Oh yes," he gulped. "She got all the help she needed. I don't think I'll ever come back here."

"Why, what happened?" Arts asked, bursting with curiosity.

Traug waved her question away, as in, *don't ask*. I had a feeling he'd had to pay for all of his uncle's sins. Karma is a bitch, really.

"Traug, we have more bad news for you. We need to dash to Purgator now but we're broke. It's all on you."

"You're lucky I'm such a nice guy," Traug said, gradually recovering from the shock he must have suffered. "One day I might present you with a bill, interest included."

"Yeah right. In pints or bottles?"

"Now that's a thought. Provided the booze is decent. Never mind. I can't find my bearings, for some reason. Where's the Gatehouse here?"

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Chapter 17

IDIOTS ARE EVERYWHERE. To the point where, as one comedian put it, *"you might be one of them"*. It shows differently in each person though. Some like to listen to music at full blast as they drive their low riders through a quiet neighborhood at midnight. Others need to drill a hole in the wall on a weekend morning. And yet others say, "let's go pin the Beholder's ears to the wall, it's gonna be fun."

The first inklings of anxiety came when the locals had told me, for the umpteenth time, that we couldn't go to Rhetnor. Because apparently, there was a monster living there, right by the Singing Cave, which killed and ate anyone who'd venture past.

Brem was an impressive medieval city topped with tall towers and encircled by a stone wall. Its inhabitants seemed to be dead serious advising us to change our plans. They didn't seem to mind Players so much here. Judging by the state of their architecture, the main battles between the Kabirids and the Archali unfolded far from here, which was probably why the locals viewed the Players not so much as a source of evil but mainly as an instrument of commerce.

The second time that got me doubting the viability of our plan was when we'd come across the robbed remains of a caravan. Considering that the tall spire of Brem's townhall was still visible on the horizon, we hadn't gone that far from the city yet.

The third and last time that got me really worried was when we'd come across the first dead bodies. I'm no specialist, so the sight of a corpse ripped in two rather uneven parts made me double up and part with my breakfast right there. The smell — the sickly sweet stench of decaying flesh — made it even worse. There was nowhere you could hide from it.

“You okay?” Traug asked, slapping my shoulder.

“I feel like a BDSM newb in barbed-wire underpants,” I said, sputtering, as I stood up. Immediately another bout of nausea flooded over me — but by then, my stomach was empty as a drum.

“Beholders are omnivores,” Litius pointed out, “but they can’t digest human bones very well, so they just pick them clean. Not all of them, even, as you can see.”

I’d spoken too soon about the empty stomach, hadn’t I? Another spasm shuddered through me, constricting my gut and forcing me to spit dark yellow bile. Disgusting. This is what normally happened to me after a good night’s drinking spree — but to add insult to injury, I wasn’t even drunk.

Spitting and clutching at my stomach, I climbed back to my feet. Strangely enough, I felt not exactly better but passable. I still stared at the mangled bodies in horror but at least I wasn’t sick anymore.

“Big caravan... was,” Traug drawled. “It was probably one of the latest ones. Let’s get going.”

We walked past a cart with a broken axle. As I glanced over it, I got the impression that someone huge had jumped down on it as hard as he could.

We slowly continued along the trail. We still came across an occasional corpse but they were few and far between now. Must have been some daredevil Purgs who’d thought to use a quick shortcut. Well, they’d miscalculated, hadn’t they?

Litius stopped and raised a warning hand. “Can you hear?”

I froze. Nothing of any interest was happening here, if you didn’t count the protection amulet that hung around the nearest corpse’s neck,

clinking in the breeze. It could have been yet another one of Litius' extraordinary abilities, considering that he was part feline, anyway.

"Over th-th-there," Litius pointed at a small hill about a hundred yards away from us and a couple dozen feet from a meandering road. "The S-s-singing C-c-caves."

"I thought they'd be bigger. More impressive, like."

"Look," Arts said, lowering her voice. "A sword. And some dust. Some packages... and runes."

She hunched over the neat heap of someone's stuff. I crouched next to her. The items lay in full view right in the middle of the road. Who could have possibly...

Arts and I must have realized it simultaneously. We exchanged alarmed stares.

"A Player," I said.

"Must have been a mercenary like ourselves. His weapons are quite basic. He must have counted on his magic skills."

"B-b-but he d-d-didn't get the ch-ch-chance to use it. Beholders may not see very well but they have excellent perception. Th-th-they can literally *feel* what's going on in close proximity. That includes any c-c-creatures that channel their aggression t-t-toward them."

"Arts, look. I've found some more. There must have been several people here."

Seven, to be precise. That's how many little stacks of loot we'd found in the end. That was nothing to sniff at.

Once we'd shared the dust equally between ourselves, I received 608 grams. I paid 500 back to Traug, 32 to Arts and 60 to Litius. I hate owing money to anybody. We also became the lucky owners of four swords, a poleax, six throwing knives, a broken bow, two charmed rings with a bonus to Strength, several weird-looking runes and a good dozen various mana elixirs, of which I confiscated two of the most powerful ones for myself. As in:

Potion of Starlit Sky

+150 to mana top-up

Waste not, want not. Only now had I realized why Hunter had given me a shoulder scabbard. I'd always believed that drawing a weapon from one's inventory was faster and easier — but by now, my inventory was absolutely crammed with so much junk that finding my moon sword in it would have been a problem. Think for yourself: the knife, the Elixir of Power, the two stones — Arthall and Karthall, the mandrake root, the Repelling Stone, the crossbow, the empty plasma thrower, and the letters which I'd taken off the dead Archalus — don't even ask why. It looked rather like an old granny's closet, not like the inventory of a young and promising Player.

"Now I can hear it too," Traug interrupted the train of my thought as I wondered whether I should clean my inventory up a bit.

"What is it?" I reached for the knife and slid it in the sheath I still mechanically wore with my clothes.

"Sounds like clinking."

"It does," Arts agreed.

I was obliged to listen, too. Maybe not clinking, but it definitely was some kind of resonating noise. Somehow I didn't think it was our friend the Beholder practicing to play the triangle. It must have been something else.

“That’s the stalactites which are comprised of rare minerals,” Litius began to explain. “They are so light that every time the breeze touches them, it makes them resonate, a bit like a tuning fork. There’re hundreds of them there. That’s why they call it the Singing Cave.”

Indeed, the further we went, the more distinct the rumbling sound became. It felt almost as if it was coming from within your head, not from the outside. I was pretty sure that any travelers were quite in a hurry to leave this place behind even before the monster arrived.

“We’ve walked quite a long way from the first bodies but we haven’t met the Beholder yet, why?”

“Because we’re not afraid of him,” Litius replied. “I have to admit I’m a bit nervous, but more about the success of our little undertaking than for anything else. None of us — neither Arts, Traug or myself — are going to face the Beholder.”

“If we’re lucky,” the girl replied softly.

“That’s why we’re not afraid. Because whenever you’re afraid, you wish you could hurt those you fear. And that’s exactly how Beholder detects his opponents, by sensing their fear. He just can’t see us. The big question is, why aren’t *you* afraid?”

Good question. I was about to walk into the den of a monster while knowing only one thing about him: that he was a powerful mentalist. Plus that he belonged to the element of Earth. That was basically it. As a creature in possession of certain magic abilities, it belonged to the mixed type. Now let’s remember the specialization that came with the Tamer skill. See my point? I’d activated Intuition right on time, hadn’t I?

Still, why wasn’t I afraid? Could it be because I couldn’t visualize him? Or rather, I had this cartoon image from *Heroes of Might and Magic III:* one eye with several droopy appendages next to it. A few tentacles

maybe, because he had to move around somehow, didn't he? But admittedly, I didn't find the image particularly frightening. Why should I?

"Wait," I said when the ringing noise in my head had become unbearable. "I'll go on my own."

"But what if—" Arts began.

"No arguing, please. Litius knows better, he's the mastermind. If he says we have a chance, then that's what it is. The main thing now is to find this Beholder creature."

"I don't think you'll have a problem with that," Traug said.

"Thinking isn't your forte, you know that?" Arts snapped, which meant that she was on edge.

"Okay, I'm off then," I said. "Try not to kill each other in the meantime."

I left the road and gingerly walked down the crumbling bank.

The cave was even bigger than I'd imagined it. And the closer I approached, the louder was the ringing in my head, growing ear-splittingly unbearable. It was so loud I couldn't hear myself think.

Once I reached the cave's entrance, I sensed a gust of cool air. It must have been born deep inside the cave and dashed past all the stalactites, impatient to leave it, making them resonate and driving me mad with their clinking choir.

I wrapped my raincoat tighter around myself, cast Light and slowly began to descend.

A tiny little brook burbled underfoot. No idea where it came from, just some underground spring which had found its way to the surface. Now

I had to be careful not to lose my footing on the slippery rocks. All my attention was focused on what was going on underfoot. That was probably why I'd failed to notice the elephant in the room.

Soon my descent became not so steep. The walls and the ceiling parted, giving way to a wide and relatively flat space.

At first, I hadn't even understood what I was looking at. A fat, shapeless, rippling mass of flesh lay before me. Its eyes — a cross between the Eye of Sauron and vertical reptilian pupils — indeed grew on top of small swaying appendages. The monster didn't have a central eye though. Those guys from *HoMM* hadn't gotten it right, after all. It didn't have any eye the size of his belly, nothing like that.

Then again, it might have had something to do with the fact that this creature didn't have a belly at all. It rather resembled a snail or a centipede. In order to move, it had to constrict its shapeless mass and shoot its whole body forward.

Which was exactly what it did when it saw me. It turned to face me. Its many eyes froze, focusing, on top of their appendages. And I... I felt like I was falling.

I felt good. Nothing perturbed me. I seemed to be rocking on the warm sea waves in July. I wanted it to last forever. I wanted to stay here for all eternity. I didn't want anyone to stand between me and this place. Not Choruls, nor Horsemen, nor Arts and all the others.

The fleeting memory of my friends caused my muscles to spasm, the way it happens when you finally get to bed, exhausted after the day's busy work, and you're hovering on the brink of sleep when suddenly you get a cramp from hell. The difference was, now it had come very handy.

Your Resistance skill has increased to level 4.

I saw this rippling mass which was almost upon me. Dozens of furious eyes stretched out on their stems as if trying to reach me. I saw its mouth at the center of its gelatinous body, packed with small sharp teeth.

Time to do it.

My hand shot out forward on its own accord (as if that could help) while I began issuing mental commands, addressing the Beholder. Or should I say, I thought I was issuing commands, because if the truth were known, I had no idea how to do it. I just kept repeating the same words over and over again, like some kind of mantra: *"Stop it. Stop now. I'm a friend. I'm a friend."*

At first, I struggled with it. Putting it plainly, I was crap at it. The Beholder continued his advance, slow as a snail but determined as a tank. Which was probably how he managed to get his reputation as a killing machine. He would bring you under his mental control, then unhurriedly arrive at the scene and have you for breakfast. Which sort of disagreed with my own plans.

I could have dashed back outside, I suppose, now that I'd managed to curb his mental control somewhat. And then what? Nothing. That was the problem.

Just stop, you sonovabitch! I thought in a rather loud and uncourteous manner.

The Beholder froze. His eyes focused at me as if challenging me; his motionless body continued to be rippled by the momentum of his sudden stop. He looked like a plateful of jelly if ever I've seen one.

Excellent. Now part two of my plan.

I took a deep breath and cast Talking to Mysterious Creatures.

Your Sorcery skill has increased to level 4.

“Hi there. I’m Serge. You shouldn’t be afraid. I’m your friend.”

My biggest worry was that this dude wouldn’t understand me. Why should he? The skill didn’t come with a 100% guarantee. It wasn’t supposed to turn me into an expert interpreter, either. The sound of my voice could be to him what the squeaking of a dolphin was to me.

I was growing increasingly worried when the creature spoke.

“Boontob no friends. Boontob alone.”

Phew. This was a tiny step for me — and a huge step for the future beholdero-human relationship. “Your name is Boontob, is that it?”

“Name Boontob,” the Beholder said, as if affirming my words.

“You can feel I don’t want to hurt you, can you?”

“Boontob feel. Boontob surprised. Many mans come, try to kill Boontob. Or they try to sneak past me. But they hate Boontob. Boontob feels it. Boontob kills them.”

“That’s exactly what I wanted to talk to you about...”

Suddenly the mental link between us broke, severing the communications. Instead of the creature’s clear albeit broken speech, I heard a scream. No, not a scream: a shriek. So that’s what his speech sounded like!

I had to cast the spell again, hoping we might find some common ground soon because my mana stocks weren’t infinite.

“Boontob, what made you come here? Do you like the Singing Cave?”

“It drive Boontob mad. Boontob can’t sleep when the Cave sing.”

“So what’s the problem, then? You can leave, can’t you? People will stop trying to kill you. And you can finally restore your fragile emotional equilibrium.”

“Boontob not understand.”

“You’ll finally calm down and won’t suffer anymore.”

“Boontob can’t leave. The wretched Zvergs stole Boontob’s baby. Boontob angry. Boontob chased them. They ran here. Boontob followed them and found them. The clever Zvergs go down the tunnel. Boontob can’t follow. Boontob wait here. When the Zvergs come out, Boontob kill them.”

So! What an unexpected development! When I’d come here, I was worried I wouldn’t be able to establish any contact with him at all — but you could actually find a common language with him!

“Are you sure the Zvergs are still down there? What if they’re gone?”

“They still down there. Four lowlifes. I can feel them. I not feel my baby, I feel them.”

Once again his speech rose to an unintelligible shriek. I had to speed up our negotiations: my mana was dwindling. I decided to try one last time and cast the spell again.

Your Sorcery skill has increased to level 5.

“So you understand that your baby is dead, is that it?”

“Yes. I knows.”

“Your revenge won’t bring her back from the dead.”

“I... kill... Zverg!”

Something shifted in his stare (or stares, rather, because I couldn’t decide which of his eyes I should look into). The anger and hatred were gone, replaced by meaningfulness. I had a bad feeling about it. Having powerful mentalist creatures stare you in the eye while plotting their own ideas isn’t a healthy thing, really.

“You say you Boontob friend,” the beholder said slowly.

“I am,” I said, feeling the trap close behind me.

“You go down. Bring me the Zverg. Or you kill them. You help Boontob, Boontob leave the cave.”

He reinforced his words with a powerful mental attack which pressed my head in its vice as if it were a ripe melon in the hands of a choosy shopper. My vision darkened; I struggled to breathe. I tried to focus and saw Boontob walk toward me again. I had a funny feeling he wouldn’t have no for an answer.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll deal with them for you. We’re friends, aren’t we?”

He stopped. His eyes hovered on their stalks, as if scanning me. Maybe they were. He could probably see that I wasn’t driven by affection but rather by self-preservation instinct. Still, he seemed content with my reply.

“Follow me.”

We moved slowly like two old men with four bad knees. But the most interesting thing was, the beholder had turned his back to me — okay, not exactly his back, but some body part which didn’t have any eyes on it.

Which meant he must have believed me and come to the conclusion that the man called Serge wasn't a threat to him.

Finally, we reached the far end of the open space. I saw two large boulders stacked one upon the other — and beneath them, the black mouth of a tunnel. I wouldn't call it small: it was probably a good three feet in diameter, but still too narrow for the beholder to squeeze his bulk through. To do that, he might have had to eat a healthier diet and start doing some exercise.

Boontob shrieked again. I hurried to cast the spell once more. You just couldn't have enough mana with this chatty individual.

"Zvergs there. They shake with fear. Boontob's friend go there."

"Yeah yeah, I know. Boontob's friend go down that ass— er, I mean, down that rabbit hole."

I cast some light, illuminating the drop. It wasn't very deep, seven or eight feet at most. And judging by the tunnel's walls, it must have been roughly hewn at some point.

Never mind. Let's see what those Zverg things were about.

I jumped into the tunnel and drew my Katzbalger.

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Chapter 18

NOT EVERYTHING THAT'S NEW is good by default. The old adage about leaving one's comfort zone shouldn't be taken as a thoughtless invitation to start rushing about just for the sake of it. Quite often, the proverbial breath of fresh air can turn out to be a real stinker.

And if you're a Player who by definition is a tasty morsel for almost every creature, sentient or otherwise, then "new" is actually synonymous with danger. Which was why, once I'd reached the large cave, I advanced warily and without undue haste.

Here, the draft was even stronger. There must have been a way out of here somewhere. In which case, I couldn't understand what kept the Zvergs in the cave.

They say that if someone's motivation is unclear, you should look for money. Which I was about to find out the hard way — but I'm jumping ahead of myself.

I cast two Mantles on myself, just in case. I had just over 200 mana left — mainly because someone had forgotten to put his fur hat on. It was about time I realized that Game clothes played a much bigger role in one's wellbeing than regular ones. Still, now it was too late to cry over it. I just had to hope that I might not need to use too much magic, after all.

It hadn't taken me long to discover a large well-lit niche. The light came from several lamps with fluorites fluttering inside. Two benches lined the walls of the niche, next to a few small kegs. At its center, there lay what must have once been the Beholder's baby.

I remembered the old bedtime story about the wolves and the stupid little kid goat. This was what the leftovers of the wolves' dinner must have

looked like. In fact, the beholder's baby was even less lucky. All that was left of him was a few jellified pieces of his apparently dismembered body. His eyes — which were only marginally smaller than those of his parent — were scattered all over the place.

Three Zvergs were still busy over the body. They looked virtually identical to Tartr, the old alchemist from Virhort, as if they were his brothers. Aha! I used to think that Tartr was actually human, only a rather puny one with tiny arms and legs. Like, he had some kind of hormone deficiency or something. But apparently, he was a Zverg too! Oh well, you live and learn.

Those three miniscule individuals were busy gutting the baby Beholder, extracting some kind of long white slimy threads from his flesh. I got my answer: that's what had kept them here. Why not? It was a good hiding place — and a safe one, too, because no one would venture anywhere near it thanks to a free mind-reading guard who'd willingly posted himself by the only entry. As for the guard himself, there was no way he could squeeze himself down here — unless he found a human being prepared to obey his orders (or to succumb to his plea, as the case may be) and go down to deal with the Zvergs.

Admittedly, my arrival had produced quite a furor. I don't even know what I can compare it to. Imagine a nineteenth-century ballroom in some posh country mansion full of waltzing gentry — then a local revolutionary peasant enters the ballroom with a bucket in his hands, walks all the way to the center, lowers his pants and defiantly relieves himself. That might give you some idea.

The Zvergs froze, afraid of as much as to twitch, without taking their eyes off my Katzbalger. As in, excuse me, sir, your toothpick is a bit big, don't you think? Admittedly, I too was at a loss, having expected to confront some mystical semi-sentient creatures, not miniature humans.

"*Haisa, Parat,*" one of them finally squeaked.

“Haisa,” I nodded back without taking offense for the *Parat* bit.

“Alt arna kuush?”

“Sorry, I don’t understand,” I reluctantly admitted.

The speaker breathed a sigh of relief. “You speak human.”

The others seemed to have relaxed a little too.

“Where are you from, Cesspit?” the speaker asked.

I gave a cautious nod. “Yep.”

“My brother and I are from Ullum. Or rather, I was born there. And once I grew up a little and got initiated, I started traveling between worlds. I met him,” he pointed at the Zverg sitting next to him, “in Skirtsville. And this one,” his finger shifted to the right pointing at the Zverg next in line, “in Brem. I used to sell stuff from Qird. So we just ended up here together, all of us. What brought you here?”

I realized that he wasn’t really afraid of me anymore. The moment I’d arrived — a giant half-Korl — the Zverg must have been alarmed. But now, seeing that I was quite forthcoming, he must have relaxed his guard.

Still, I was in a funny state of mind. I really didn’t know what to do. On one hand, I’d promised that jellified mentalist to sort out his differences with his offenders. On the other, these creatures were sentient too.

“I was asked to come here and deal with the Beholder.”

The Zverg shrugged. “How’re you gonna do that? You could catch a young one, I suppose, while their mental energy is still weak. They’re real stupid, too. But once they grow up, you can forget it, dude. Unless you’ve got a Master in Resistance.”

“I spoke with him. He told me he was there to make sure you don’t escape.”

“Spoke with whom?” the Zverg asked, surprised.

“With the Beholder.”

“Oh really?” he still sounded surprised. “Never mind. It won’t take long. As soon as we’re finished, we’re gonna leave.”

“I think he’s gonna follow you.”

The Zverg laughed. “It might actually be funny. Let him follow us. We’ll simply seek shelter in Brem, behind the city walls. I’m quite curious to see how he’s gonna storm the city. I could bet my last dollar he’s gonna snatch the minds of a few city guards and make them swordfight each other. They might even open the city gate for him, actually. But he stands no chance in a thousand-strong city.”

“But lots of innocent people will die,” I said, feeling my hand close around my Katzbalger hilt. “Both humans and Purgs.”

Oh well. He’d actually made it easier for me, relieving me of the necessity to make a hard choice.

“They’re only commoners!” the Zverg said. “They don’t know any better. We’re Players, aren’t we? We need to stick together.”

“Those two friends of yours aren’t Players, are they?” I said.

He shrugged. “It’s only a question of time. As soon as we sell all this fat, we’ll have enough for two initiations.”

“I see. You’re gonna hire some muggers, then?”

“Sure.”

“So much for Players sticking together, eh?”

He must have realized our conversation had strayed off into an uncomfortable zone. He’d missed the moment when it all had gone wrong, so now he was just blinking in confusion, completely at a loss what to say.

Admittedly, it didn’t take him long to recover: he wasn’t a gang leader for nothing, after all.

“You ain’t gonna make problems for us, are you?” he said. “We could give you some of the fat,” he pointed at one of the kegs. “We’ve been following that Beholder for months. First, he had to give birth and then we had to wait until he left the baby and walked away to a safe distance. It’s okay, though. We understand. Zvergs can be grateful.”

“I’m not sure about all Zvergs, but I’ve got the impression that all you’re trying to do is to cover up your sorry asses.”

“Looks like we won’t be able to come to an agreement, then,” he said with a threatening shake of his head, as if shooing away a stubborn fly.

I knew straight away the gesture wasn’t meant for me but for his partners in crime. I unclenched my other hand while scrolling through my inventory, then pulled out my crossbow by the handle.

Simple, really. Those two other idiots were commoners which meant they couldn’t use magic and had no protection like Mantles or Veils. Both could be killed with one blow. Having said that, I still had no idea what kind of racial ability they might have.

The remaining Player — whom I’d identified as an Exploder — seemed to be the only problem. I had a very bad feeling about his development branch. You didn’t need Intuition to tell you his moniker was trouble.

I couldn’t tell which one of us had started the fight. I was just raising the crossbow when one of the commoners leapt upon me. He was almost touching the crossbow bolt when I fired it.

Your Shooting skill has increased to level 30.

You’ve achieved Mastery in the following skill: Shooting.

Mastery level: 3

Improves both accuracy and reloading speed of mobile electromagnetic weapons.

You’ve killed a Commoner who was hostile to you.

Probably, had he been bigger and heavier, he wouldn’t have flown so spectacularly through the air. But even so, the effect was quite useful. The dead body blocked the Player’s field of vision, giving me some grace time to deal with the other commoner. None of the Zvergs had struck me as the fighting type: I was surprised they’d dared to attack the Beholder to begin with.

The little man was brandishing two curved knives, fully intending to do me some damage. Probably the same knives he’d used to flay the Beholder’s baby. Now why would you try to use them against someone much taller and stronger, someone who also has a sword in his hands? Why? What was he counting on?

I lunged at him, burying the Katzbalger’s blade in his neck. Drawn by momentum, the Zverg briefly continued to move forward, sliding up the blade and impaling himself ever deeper, until finally he slumped down.

You’ve killed a Commoner who was hostile to you.

Last one, please! I swung round, unable to suppress a smile. The Player with the proud Exploder handle picked up a stone and took a swing.

Did he think he was David to my Goliath or something? Shame he didn’t have a sling. Very well, let him try.

The rock was so small the Zverg’s tiny hand closed around it entirely. Still, it was full of surprises. At first it was just a well-behaved little stone which must have been lying here minding its own business since time immemorial. That’s until some divine force lifted it in the air and hurled it at me. I didn’t mind. It didn’t seem to glow or heat up and didn’t seem to mean any harm at all. So I too acted naturally, dodging slightly to one side to make sure it didn’t hit my shoulder so I could counterattack the remaining Zverg.

That’s when it blew up.

The little rock exploded to smithereens like an anti-personnel grenade, instantly stripping me of 50% health and the two Mantles I’d cast earlier. The shock wave pinned me to the wall.

Well, at least now I knew it. The idea of Exploder was in, well, exploding any ordinary item. Not the best of experiences, but I still had four time rewinds up my sleeve which made it less of a hassle.

[∞]

I darted forward to close the distance between us, presuming the Zverg wouldn’t blow it up right in his own face. And that’s exactly what happened. By the time the rock exploded, it was already behind my back. Even so, my opponent had played it safe, afraid of making the explosion too powerful for fear of burying both of us alive under the debris.

Still, I’d gotten my fair share of it. It felt like I’d been pelleted on the back. My Mantles were gone before I even knew it; I momentarily lost my balance and fell flat on the floor right in front of my adversary.

I had a hunch I shouldn’t rest on my laurels, instinctively sensing I was in for another surprise. On instinct I raised my head, scanning the space for my enemy, then used my free hand to cast Combat Telekinesis.

Wait a sec... Why was my hand free? What happened to my sword? Never mind. I’d sort it all out later.

Your Mysticism skill has increased to level 9.

Oh wow! This time this Telekinesis thing had really worked! Either I was getting the hang of it or I’d been plain lucky, but the spell sent the Zverg flying against the wall. His head hit the stone with a cracking sound; he dropped to one side, unconscious.

I scrambled heavily to my feet, replaced the crossbow back into the inventory, found my Katzbalger and walked over to the Zverg.

I could never understand all that high horse stuff about not hurting an unarmed opponent. All those theatrical gestures of raising the gun, then putting it down again. Like, they can’t bring themselves to fire it. In my humble opinion, if you have enough guts to pick up a gun, you should be prepared to fire it. Otherwise just don’t pick it up in the first place. If you ask me, all this so-called emotional struggle of a seven-foot beefcake with a machine gun isn’t worth jack.

I touched the sword tip to his rising and falling chest, then listened to my gut feeling to see if I was feeling anything resembling hesitation or pangs of conscience. Nothing. Zilch. On the contrary: the memory of the shrapnel that had hit me in the back only reinforced my determination.

I pressed the Katzbalger in. Slowly, almost soundlessly, it blade entered my opponent’s body. I kept pressing until the steel screeched against the rock. Then I pulled the sword out and took another look at my defeated enemy.

Dead as a dodo. Even the greatest of all Players eventually die if you make a hole in them.

You've killed a Player who was hostile to you.

A change in development branch available: Exploder. In order to activate it, you need to select it as your new development branch within the next 24 hours.

You've gained the Basic Lock-Picking spell.

What, was that all? Okay, I hadn't expected another Avatar — but no new skills? So much for Zvergs!

As for the actual loot, it too was rather modest. 315 grams of dust, a set of lock picks, and some smelly collection of mysterious plants — I felt too squeamish to even pick it up. No weapons worth mentioning, apart from the curved knife he'd used to gut the beholder's baby. Of course. Why would an Exploder even need a weapon if they can just use any stray object lying around?

I studied the three kegs. They seemed to hold about twenty pints each. All of them contained the white thread-like stuff which the Zverg had just described as "fat". It actually looked the part, and I had a funny feeling it must be prohibitively expensive. Those little guys must have had a good reason to risk their necks by angering a powerful mentalist creature like the Beholder. Two of the kegs were full, the third one half-empty. Wonder if they might fit...

Much to my pleasure, my inventory was indeed almost bottomless. I'd managed to fit everything in without a problem. The only difference was, now I could sense some discomfort in my back and shoulders, as if I was actually lugging all that weight. But I could live with that. Now, what else?

I walked over to the baby's remains, bent down and cut off a bundle of eyes, just hoping it wouldn't be regarded as desecration of his body. The sound of the knife slicing through the stalks was loud and obnoxiously crunchy as if I'd cut down a fat juicy plant. Well, what did you want me to do? His dad (or his mom, maybe, I couldn't tell the difference) knew that their baby was dead, anyway. And the mission required me to produce the Beholder's eyes as proof. I suppose, his fat might have been proof enough, but then with the Governor of Brem you never know.

I checked the commoners' pockets, just to make sure I hadn't missed anything. I hadn't. Some local Purg money, a couple of knives and other junk. Nothing I could use.

I was just about to turn round and leave when a sharp pain pierced the small of my back. I screamed — not so much from pain as from anger with myself. Did I really have to get myself impaled on a knife just to get smarter?

Hadn't the Beholder told me, in plain language, that there were four of them down here? Four, not three! Okay, he hadn't exactly "told" it to me, but you know what I mean. Also, hadn't the Zverg Player told me that both he and his brother were from Ullum? Because the two commoners were local, they were from Purgator! So I'd missed one of them, apparently. He might have been out patrolling the area or just looking for the exit which created this terrible draft. How, oh how could I have forgotten?

All this had flashed through my head. There was only one thing I could do, really.

[∞]

The kegs sitting snugly in my inventory had played a bad joke on me. Apparently, I wasn't as fast and agile as I used to be. Ask someone to put on a 45-pound army backpack and see how that's gonna help his waltzing skills. I was more or less in the same position.

I’d managed to jerk to one side, so instead of stabbing me, he dealt me a slash wound. Marginally better. Shame about the raincoat though. Bumpkin wouldn’t be amused.

Call me a racist if you wish but all Zvergs seemed not just alike to me — they were downright identical twins. His clothes were light and inconspicuous; in the uneven light, his knife blade seemed to emit a strange glistening glow.

I had no intention of waiting for him to attack me again. Instead, I made my own move. That’s when the moon steel sitting in the sheath slung around my shoulder had come in handy. I thanked the Universe for not endowing the Zvergs with agility — because he failed to dodge my attack. He shuddered; his shoulder twitched — and that was the end. I stabbed him a few more times until I saw a new message confirming his demise:

Your Short Blades skill has increased to level 19.

You’ve killed a Player who was hostile to you.

A change in development branch available: Zoopator. In order to activate it, you need to select it as your new development branch within the next 24 hours.

You’ve gained the Load Relieving spell.

I staggered and was forced to reach out and grab at the wall to remain standing. Dammit. Either the knife was suspect, or the wound it had dealt me was really unlucky. My whole flank was already drenched in blood. That wasn’t in the script. I really didn’t want some future Purg archeologists to discover my mummified self in the cave — like a Gulliver surrounded by four ill-meaning Lilliputians. Not the kind of company one would appreciate.

I cast Healing of Minor Wounds. It didn’t garner me a new level which meant that it hadn’t helped me much, either. Still, I got the impression that the bleeding was less profuse now. I just might make it. If only I could get to Arts, she sure would know how to heal me.

I staggered uphill toward the entrance. I’d been lucky the Zvergs were such a puny bunch. To reach the opening above, they’d built some makeshift steps out of nearby rocks which were actually quite sturdy, allowing even a miserable wounded bastard like myself to climb up. No idea what I’d have done if I’d had to pull my weight up to get out. But as it were, it made things much easier...

I climbed onto a rock, held on fast to the wall, then climbed the next one. I was pretty sure I’d made it when suddenly my head went round, clouding my vision. The last thing that flashed through my mind was the Beholder’s shapeless bulk. Was it a figment of my imagination? Or...

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Chapter 19

GREED IS ARGUABLY humanity's greatest malaise. Some small-town guy may languish in misery dreaming of better days when he finally has — say — a hot tub. But once he gets the coveted item, it promptly becomes part of his daily routine that fails to please him anymore: not a source of joy but yet another piece of baggage to lug around his life.

It's always like this. We keep getting, getting, getting new stuff. Non-stop, 24/7. We surround ourselves with more new items which become part of our little world — and if one of them disappears, our whole universe comes crashing around our ears, driving us into a stupor.

Before, I'd never bothered to think twice about such things as medical help. I knew it was there, and that was the extent of it. All the jokes about women giving birth, stuck in the traffic! But the moment I'd found myself in a world without doctors, painkillers and blood transfusion stations, I sort of changed my outlook.

It was a good job I had Arts. Not to mention two more friends who were now busy arguing. I opened my eyes a crack, stuck my fingers into the hole in my clothes and felt a thin scar.

Jesus. At this rate, I dreaded to think what my body would look like in old age — provided I lived to reach it. I frowned, remembering Hunter's scar-ridden torso.

"Quiet! He's come round."

I cast a look around. We were sitting by the roadside not far from the Ringing — oops, sorry, my bad — Singing Cave. I couldn't for the life of me remember how I'd gotten out of there. The last thing I'd seen before passing out was the Beholder.

“How did I get here?” I asked.

“Some guy brought you here,” Arts replied. “He was tall and handsome.”

“What are you talking about! It was a woman!” Traug objected. “She had those two awesome... er, don’t matter. And a most attractive rear view.”

“I feel admittedly befuddled by my friends’ testimonies,” Litius butted in. “I can assure you that it was the most adorable little kitty — I mean, a catwoman. If we surmise that—”

“You don’t have to surmise anything,” I said. “All of you saw the Beholder. That’s mental control for you. So in which direction did that man-girl-catwoman leave?”

“That way,” they all said, pointing in different directions.

“I see. Well, judging by the fact that the Beholder got out and saved me as well, he must have left the Singing Cave for good. In which case, we’ve done everything right. Wait a sec.”

I opened my interface and scanned through the plethora of new messages which had flooded my inbox. I scrolled all the way to the last ones which read:

You’ve helped a Commoner who is friendly to you.

+20 karma points. Current level: +5660. You gravitate to the Light Side.

You’ve helped a Commoner who is friendly to you.

+20 karma points. Current level: +5680. You gravitate to the Light Side.

New characteristic available: Illustrious

You've unlocked additional abilities of the Divine Avatar: Savior. Unlocking auxiliary abilities requires 15000 pt. Light Karma.

Your fame has increased to 9.

Your reputation has changed to Rōnin.

All of that was irrelevant. I poked at my Avatar and hurried to imbibe all the new information.

Blessing

Allows you to raise the Health, Vigor and Mana of twelve friendly sentient beings 200%.

Use: on those within your field of vision

Duration: 3 minutes

Cooldown: 72 hours

Healing

Allows you to remove any negative effects of any illness, substance dependence, or destructive habit while maxing out the person's Health.

Use: local, requires physical contact (touch) with the person you'd like to heal.

Cooldown: 7 days

Congregation

Allows you to convert twelve hostile Players to friendly ones.

Use: on the nearest persons around you.

Duration: 5 minutes

Cooldown: 7 days

“Well, lady and gentlemen, I think congratulations are in order,” I said. “You’re looking at an Illustrious.”

“Litius, you smart bastard,” Traug said, tousling the fur on the top of the catman’s head.

“Tell us all from the start,” Arts interrupted him. “Don’t miss anything.”

“Okay, so I walked into that cave and who do I see? An Englishman, Scotsman and Irishman—”

“Oh please!”

“Okay, okay.”

My saga of the valorous, stupid and relatively lucky me took me all of ten minutes. When I told them about the fourth Zverg attacking me, Arts rolled her eyes, Traug shook a disapproving head while Litius diplomatically abstained from commenting on my mental facilities.

But once I’d mentioned the kegs containing the “fat”, my friends seemed to have come strangely awake. Even the news of my promotion to the Illustrious status hadn’t elicited such enthusiasm.

“Fat? Which fat? You mean, Beholder fat?” Traug’s eyes lit up.

“Wait a sec, you’re gonna scare him off,” Arts said in a low voice without taking her eyes off me. “Sergei, sweetheart,” she said in a saccharine voice, “what have you done with those kegs?”

“They’re in my inventory. I just thought, if the Zvergs needed it, we might use it too.”

“You still have some brains, you know,” she said with a wide grin, breathing a sigh of relief.

“I wondered why he was so heavy!” Traug said, beaming like a little boy who’d just got a bike for his birthday. “That’s... that’s... that’s a helluva lot of money!”

“Allow me to attract your attention to the fact that Sergei has procured that so-called fat on his own,” Litius said without joining in their elation, “so by all unwritten rules the loot belongs to him alone.”

A moment of discomfiture hung in the air.

“Hey, what’s wrong with you?” I hurried to dispel it. “My name’s not Scrooge, is it? We’ve been through a lot together. It goes without saying we must share it between us.”

“Sergei!” Arts gave me a hug and a smack on the cheek. Now I felt really uncomfortable.

Traug slammed my shoulder. “You’re a real mensch!”

Never thought I’d live to hear something like that from him. “Why, is it so valuable?” I asked.

Arts rolled her eyes. “Gosh, how can we explain it to him?”

“Let me try,” Litius said, assuming a dignified air. “Let’s put it this way. Just finding a Beholder is an incredibly difficult undertaking. And finding one that has fat on him...”

“You mean, not every Beholder has any?”

“Exactly. Their bodies only excrete it at certain periods. Normally, during adolescence. But you have to be suicidal to attack a young Beholder. Because their parent will focus on the aggressor, and it’s not so easy to escape a powerful mentalist creature like that. Some researchers believe that Beholders can sense their attacker even across many worlds. So to attack one, you have to be—”

“...an absolute and utter nutcase,” Traug finished his phase for him. “Even pro mercs from central worlds give them a wide berth. The money’s good but it won’t buy you a new life.”

“We could offer the fat to the Governor of Brem,” Arts suggested. “Of course he won’t have such a shitload of money upfront but we could make him pay in installments.”

“Okay, you do it,” I said, climbing back to my feet.

My side still hurt like hell. Even with magic, wounds take time to heal.

“Let’s get outta here,” I said. “I’ve had enough of this graveyard ambience.”

I scooped all the junk out of my inventory, intending to pack the kegs first, then stuff all the rest around them. It could do with a bit of tidying. Still, Arts appeared to be amused by my actions.

“Sergei, what’s that you’ve got there?”

“Just a mandrake root. I got it from a friend.”

“Yeah, just a root that heals all wounds, including those dealt by magic, not to mention regular slashed ones,” she said, assuming the tone of an elementary school teacher.

“Oh shit.”

“Next time I suggest you keep a mental list of what you’ve got in your own pockets.”

What was wrong with me today? Was my brain low on vitamins or something? Should I start taking supplements? All I’d had to do was cut a slice off the root and smear the juice over the wound. Which would have saved me all that wounded-hero stuff. On the other hand, I hadn’t wasted the root. Scrooge would definitely have been proud of me, after all.

“Ah, forget it. Let’s go to Brem now.”

We set off on the return journey, slowly (because my flank was still hurting quite a bit) but surely. Either I’d already got accustomed to the gory scenes of rotting corpses, or I’d already dispensed of what breakfast I’d had earlier that day, but the surrounding views didn’t make me sick anymore. We were lucky the weather wasn’t warm — not as cold as our winter back in Cesspit but chilly enough to discourage any flies.

Then it was our turn to be surprised. I got the impression that even the townhall’s spire cocked to one side in disbelief, seeing the four of us back in one piece. The guards by the gates reluctantly uncrossed their halberds and watched our progress with mistrust. They must have remembered where we’d been gone and why.

Gradually, a crowd of commoners began to grow around us, pointing their fingers at us and talking between themselves.

By the time we’d reached the Syndicate, we felt like rock stars. The reason we’d come here was not so much as to redeem the mission (because

according to Arts, if a mission was issued by a particular person, you could always get paid by them) but simply to avoid all the prying stares. Syndicates were off limits to commoners — even though Players, too, kept looking at us with curiosity.

"We need to celebrate," Traug announced, heading for the bar.

"Not here, not now," I said sternly. "We've got the loot to sort out first. I don't mean all the junk we got off the dead Players, although it must be worth something too, even if it's a pittance. Let's deal with the fat first. Do we need to go to the Governor?"

"Oh yes. He can't rip us off even if he wanted too," Arts said. "Otherwise no Player will ever set foot here again. And we do need a middleman. We can't just offer something like this on the black market. Players have been killed for much less. No amount of anonymity will help us. But if the Governor sells the stuff for us, no one will dare rip *him* off. That would be an absolute scandal."

"That's settled, then. Let's get rid of the fat and try to talk up the price a little if we can. That's your responsibility," I told Arts. "Then we can all go home, and tomorrow we have Elysium to tackle. That's up to Traug and myself."

You've taken the next step toward acquiring the Leadership skill.

Arts chuckled. "We are ambitious, aren't we?"

"I have a funny feeling that time is working against us," I said. "Also, we shouldn't forget about those mercs who've already left. We might have to steal their show."

"What a scheming little son of a gun," Arts said in surprise. "It's not every day you hear something like this from an Illustrious. Still, count me in."

“Oh, give it a break, will ya? Okay, Traug, one drink won’t hurt us.”

We lingered there for another fifteen minutes or so, enough for a couple of beers. At least that’s what I’d had. Traug and Litius had left me far behind. As for Arts, she’d kept us company purely symbolically.

In the meantime, I’d managed to redeem the mission. The Purg clerk wasn’t impressed by the Beholder’s eye I gave him. He could have pretended, you never know. Never mind. I still had a few left, complete with the stalks they grew on. I was pretty sure I’d find some grateful customers in the city center.

Having waited for the crowd in front of the Syndicate to disperse somewhat, we hurried outside and beelined for the townhall. Very soon we were trailed by more gawkers — and I couldn’t help but notice in my vanity that a lot of them looked at me with something reminiscent of awe. Yeah right, sure. Like they’d never seen a hero before.

At the entrance to the townhall, we were finally forced to slow down as the guards started grilling us about our names and the purpose of our visit, then told us to wait. Once I’d realized that this could take us forever, I produced a bundle of eyes from my inventory which seemed to have sped the process up quite a bit.

They took us through some awesome halls — you could tell the locals were proud of their townhall. Still, little by little the rooms started showing signs of decay. The furnishings grew shabbier, the parquet floors had lost their sheen, the crystal chandeliers only had half the candles burning. Apparently, at some point the money flow must have dwindled, putting an end to the opulence of the front rooms.

I knew I’d been right when I saw the Governor — a puny little man with a balding head and a prominent nose. He was wearing a threadbare doublet, loose pants and high boots. He turned out to be — surprise — a Purg, sitting in his chair surrounded by a retinue of his brethren.

“Greetings to the valorous saviors of the city of Brem!” he rose to greet us. “On my own behalf and on behalf of my fellow townsfolk, I’d like to thank you for ridding us of that terrible monster! A squad of soldiers has already left for the cave to drag the Beholder’s body as far away as possible.”

Yeah right. How about they wanted to check if I indeed had killed him or just pilfered the eye somewhere?

“From what I hear, you’ve already been paid your due by the Syndicate.”

“That’s right. They’ve paid us in full, to the last gram.”

“How can I help you, then?”

Of course, how could he? We may have well been heroes and all that but he was making it clear that we were not getting a VIP treatment from him. We’d already got our pay and their gratitude, so now we could get the hell outta here.

So I decided to cut to the chase. “While we were busy ridding your glorious city of the terrible monster, we managed to lay our hands on something interesting. Here,” I set the half-full keg onto the table.

The Governor lifted himself on his elbows from his seat. His eyes glistened; he jumped to his feet and scrambled toward me without taking his eyes off the keg.

“This... this is...” he managed with shaking lips.

“That’s Beholder fat, or so it’s called. According to Litius, it’s actually secreted by some glands, but that’s irrelevant — and admittedly rather boring. I wasn’t gonna talk about that. I’d like to offer you a deal.”

“Whatever you wi—, er, I mean, speak up,” the Governor said, remembering he was here in official capacity.

“I’d like you to be our middleman in selling it. You will receive your commission, of course. For this privilege, you will pay us five kilos of dust upfront. The rest of the money you can transfer to my in-game bank account.”

The Governor just kept nodding like a wind-up toy. “Would that be Purple Horizon Bank or Trade Route?”

“Er...” I faltered.

“Trade Route,” Arts and Litius replied for me in unison.

Well done, guys. They’d told me about the banks on our return journey from the cave — but they’d let out the fact that there were several of them here, as well as the names of the richest ones. Don’t get me wrong: I’d already sort of guessed it myself. The Game’s system was too complex to manage without some kind of centralized financial institution. A lot of Players had their own bank accounts to secure their dust savings from other Players. In case they died, such savings were transferred to their nearest of kin. And considering the Players’ mortality rate, these kinds of services were in high demand.

“We need to draw up a contract,” the Governor said, his face glowing so bright as if he’d had uranium isotopes for breakfast.

The contract took us another half-hour. Arts was haggling like her life depended on it; Litius disagreed with some of the contract entries; Traug used the opportunity to chat up a few of the ladies-in-waiting. Good. Let them all do their bit for a change.

In the end, surrounded by what looked like the entire guards’ corps in town (or so it looked to me), we headed for the bank.

Only now did I realize why Arts and Litius had chosen Trade Route. According to Arts, Purple Horizon may have had a wider network but its greedy tentacles were mainly spread over the central worlds — while Trade Route had all the backwater. There were a few smaller shops, too, but we hadn't considered them at all. Besides, there was only one in-game bank in the whole of Brem.

Predictably, it was a far cry from the posh edifices of some of the bank branches back on Earth. Just a small office that this backcountry merited. But even so, they rose to the occasion, treating us in all seriousness and respect. Then again, why wouldn't they, when we'd come to them to finalize the deal of the century?

They had the kegs weighed and their contents catalogued, then poured the 'fat' into a huge container and had the guards seal it in our presence. The treasurer, looking just as excited as the Governor, produced four hefty money bags — they simply didn't have five kilos of dust, so Arts had managed to bring the advance up to four kilos. We all signed on the dotted line, and the treasurer handed us the bags.

"I expect the first sales to go through in the next couple of days," the Governor told me cheerfully, shaking my hand. "After every deal, the amount will be divided by four and sent to your respective accounts. Minus the 11% I'll deduct in favor of Brem's tradesmen."

Or in favor of his own pocket. Still, I shook his proffered hand with a smile. Only a few hours ago, I'd had all of twenty grams in my pocket, and now I was the proud owner of a kilo and a half. Then again, we'd all profited from this deal: my friends as well as the people of Brem. I'd done good for everyone. Oh, Sergei, Sergei. Had heaven for good boys existed, they'd have let you in without an entry ticket.

"Excuse me, Sir," the clerk addressed me demurely when everybody else was about to leave. "Seeing as you're our new client now, you might need a map of all our branches. Here you are."

The parchment was old, dry and quite heavy. I crumbled it in my hands — then very nearly gasped with amazement, seeing hundreds of new dots light up on my interface map, including the areas covered with the mist of war.

All those worlds, so many of them! Don't get me wrong, I knew that the Universe was big — but that was just too much!

It took me some effort to find the area on the map available to me. So: they had five branches in Cesspit and seven in Purgator, four each in Elysium and Firoll (so that neither felt left out, I suppose), none at Atrain and six in Noggle.

It took all of my willpower to pry myself away from the map. "Thanks," I said, nodding to the clerk.

"You're always welcome, Sir. It's an honor helping you."

Once outside, I just couldn't keep it to myself anymore. On our way back to the Gates, I shared my discovery with them.

Arts sniffed. Traug cracked a sarcastic grin. The ever-patient Litius explained,

"Trade Route is the second biggest bank. But even so it makes sense to keep a small amount of money in each of them. For instance, not only do they guarantee their clients' confidentiality, but also their safety. Which means that if someone tries to attack you in the bank building, all the staff will rush to your help." He paused and added, "Normally."

"Yeah right. Shame it's so expensive," Traug chuckled. "And I wouldn't say that their interest rate is very generous. The best place to keep dust is under your pillow!"

"Your train of thought regarding the potential control of a person's financial flow doesn't do you credit," Litius said coldly. "This is highly

imprudent. Besides—”

Litius hadn’t finished. His ears twitched, turning toward the Gatehouse. He arched his back just like a regular cat.

Noticing the change in his friend, Traug promptly equipped his armor too. Arts pulled out her staff. I swallowed the lump in my throat and stepped forward.

Because something very weird was going on.

A sharp pain pierced my freshly-healed wound. It hurt so much as if Arts had botched her healing job, allowing the bleeding to reopen. But at the moment, it didn’t feel like a big deal. Because I could already see several Players who stood around the Gatehouse, backing off. And I could hear the sounds of fighting coming from within.

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Chapter 20

WAR ALWAYS CATCHES us unawares. You can never be fully prepared. You can forge enough weapons and train enough soldiers, but you can never get used to your friends dying around you. The only thing that's worse is the death of an Achilles — an invincible warrior who doesn't know defeat. When someone like his dies, it can paralyze a whole army, its morale plummeting.

In this case, all of us surrounding the Gatehouse played the part of such an army watching their colossus — a giant, a demigod who could open pathways to other worlds — who was fighting a losing battle.

The Gatekeeper came flying out of his sanctuary like a drunk patron kicked out of a bar by a burly bouncer. His awesome armor rattled over the cobblestones as he curled up and swung round to face his attacker.

A young man came out of the Gatehouse, holding the Gatekeeper's sword in one hand and some strange contraption — definitely a weapon — in the other.

He took an unhurried aim. For a brief moment, we went blind. The attack threw the Gatekeeper another ten feet back. The young Player — according to my Insight, his development branch was Protector — was instantly upon him, taking a swing with the Gatekeeper's own sword. The abnormally huge blade sliced through the armor, wounding the giant.

Something stirred inside me, awakening. Something strange, alien even. Something that could only be explained by the influence of my Intuition.

"We can't let the Gatekeeper die," I said in a soft voice.

“We what?” Arts asked, unable to draw her gaze from the scene of combat — or rather, the scene of merciless massacre.

“The Gatekeeper shouldn’t die.”

“No one can kill him,” Litius muttered.

“Well, take a look!” I pulled him by the sleeve.

It was indeed a terrible sight. The young Player towered over the Gatekeeper, literally slaughtering him. He would shoot him with some sort of either a plasma gun or grenade launcher, stunning him, then finish him off with his own sword. Rinse and repeat. The moment the Gatekeeper stirred, he received more of the same. I didn’t need Intuition to tell me this couldn’t last forever.

“We need to help him,” I started toward the scene, pulling out my crossbow as I walked.

My rational and emotional minds were fighting within me. The former was screaming at me to keep away. This battle was way out of my league. Amateur lightweights don’t challenge professional super heavyweights. It was all gonna end very badly. The only person who’d gain from it would be the one whom my friends would commission to write my obituary.

Still, I had this inexplicable hunch which was pushing me to interfere. It’s a bit like when you see a guy with a bazooka taking aim at a nuclear power station’s cooler. You just have to stop him before it’s too late, otherwise everyone will die, him and you included. There was only one little problem: how was I supposed to stop a Player who seemed to be defeating none other than the Gatekeeper himself with effortless ease?

The other Players kept backing off from the house without really paying attention to me. The attacker, too, was too busy with his victim...

I shuddered. A victim! I'd never thought I'd one day use the word to describe this awesome armor-bound giant. But whether I liked it or not, that's what it looked like right now.

"Wait," a voice stopped me.

I swung round, meeting Arts' frightened stare.

"Please don't."

"Watch me," I said, feeling like some cartoon hero. Looking at Arts had just reminded me how scared I really was. And so was she.

"What's the plan?" she asked. Goosebumps were rapidly covering the exposed parts of her skin — but I knew they weren't caused by cold. Still, she resolutely drew both her sword and her staff.

"We need to draw his attention away from the Gatekeeper," I said. "He's a Protector. Know what that means?"

Arts shrugged. "Something to do with safety?"

Yeah right, no points for guessing this one. I just needed more hard data. I pointed my crossbow at him and whispered to Arts, "All together."

It would have been stupid to expect our joint attack to break through his defenses. My bolt had gone off a split second before Arts' fireball, ricocheting from the young Player and showering him with blue sparks. Predictably, the attacker had a Mantle cast on him. But Arts' fiery assault had singed his eyebrows (among other things). How weird. With his potential, you'd think he'd cast at least one Veil on himself. I refused to believe he didn't know the spell.

Arts' fireball hadn't really discomforted him, but at least we'd achieved what we'd been trying to do: the Player left the Gatekeeper alone and switched his attention to us.

I could hear my heart drop into my boots and curl up there, clinging to my toes and refusing to come out.

The Player raised his gun, or whatever it was, and squeezed the trigger. The shot blinded me — but I'd managed to do the most important thing.

[∞]

I pushed Arts aside and dropped to the ground, then rolled in the opposite direction and thrust my hand out, casting Ice Flourish. The place where I'd just stood aiming my crossbow was shattered, the cobblestones smashed to smithereens. Had it not been for my time rewind, my friends would have had precious little left of me to commit to earth, that's for sure.

In the meantime, my spell hit the Player — and dealt him some damage. He was vulnerable to magic! What the hell was going on?

The Protector put his sword away into his inventory and used the free hand to cast a spell. In the meantime, I'd managed to cast four Veils on myself.

Not that they did me any good. A cascade of ice fragments shot off his fingertips, flying in all directions. A dozen grazed me — not seriously, I'd only lost about 30% health, if that. But now I knew what the Protector was trying to do. He was trying to scare me, hoping I'd invest all my mana into protection.

Once again the unfriendly muzzle of his wonderwaffle gun stared poor Sergei in the face. Apparently, it took a couple of seconds to reload.

[∞]

This time the spell grazed me again. I’m not surprised: the cascade of icy shards had an impressive damage radius. Had I stood fifty feet away from him or so, I might have gotten away with it — maybe. But that was irrelevant because behind me, the earth reared, ploughed up by a powerful gunshot. I wasn’t hit — but the shock wave sent me flying, then threw me back to the ground shoulder first. My wounded flank began to ache again, for some reason. My vision darkened, blurring the silhouette in front of me.

When my eyesight came back, I realized that the Protector was towering over me. His expression was nonchalant: not a trace of curiosity, just the slight annoyance of a hunter who’d been following a bear trail only to discover a wounded wolf instead.

The air around him sparkled as a few Players opened fire on him, removing his Veils one after another. They were probably Arts and Litius who must have come out of his stupor. Somehow I didn’t think anybody else had hurried to our help.

Still, the Protector ignored their attacks entirely. How strange. I was absolutely sure he hadn’t cast any magic protection on himself. He simply hadn’t had the time.

The Player raised the Gatekeeper’s awesome sword. I looked at it in horror, wondering where I might end up if I rewound time now. And was it even worth it?

But before he could take a swing, the Protector squirmed in agony and dropped the sword, very nearly collapsing to the ground.

I struggled to lift myself on my elbows. That’s when I saw my savior, badly beaten up and staggering in his deformed armor — but not defeated.

The Gatekeeper. Dust poured out of his wounds, the precious stuff used in spell casting, materialization and traveling across worlds. The sight was creepy but fascinating.

It didn’t last, though. The Protector stopped squirming, stood up and turned toward his enemy. The greedy muzzle of his gun stared at the Gatekeeper’s chest. A gunshot resounded through the air.

[∞]

I glanced down, checking the number of bolts I had left. Only two. If my calculations were correct, I just might deal him some damage now. Otherwise... otherwise we were toast.

I waited for the Player to recover from the Gatekeeper’s mental control. There he was, turning round... while I raised the crossbow in a quivering hand...

Well, you asked for it.

The bolt hit the Protector in the leg, sinking so deep you would think he’d been born like this. Oh the sweet sound of a defeated enemy’s screams! Okay, maybe not defeated quite yet, but now the last piece of this jigsaw puzzle had finally clicked into its slot. And Arts’ fireball which this time had indeed discomforted our opponent a little had become an additional clue in this brain teaser.

I scrambled back to my feet, drew my Katzbalger and walked toward the Protector who was still facing the Gatekeeper but was already half-turning his head toward me as if undecided which one of us to tackle first.

“Arts, keep casting!” I shouted, high on adrenaline.

There was no way in hell I could defeat him in honest combat. I didn't even count on that. I could distract him, giving Arts a chance to fry him up — and if the Gatekeeper was strong enough to cast a spell or two, we just might make it.

But we didn’t get the chance to cross swords because Traug, clad in his heavy suit of armor and yelling like someone possessed, ran slap into the Player, ramming him with his whole body — only to bounce back like a football. Poor bastard. Never mind. We were about to take care of the guy’s karma.

Arts and the Gatekeeper attacked the Player virtually in synch. This time the Guardian of the Worlds must have employed something truly destructive which blew the Protector into the air, then slammed him into the wall of the nearest building. It was a good job the house hadn’t caught fire because the Player was all covered in burn marks from Arts’ fireball.

Still, our opponent had no intention of giving up. He swung round, taking in the odds, and then — he just disappeared.

I could have blamed it on some skill he had, like Invisibility or Incremental Apparition, but the flurry of dust which swirled up into the air, glittering in the sun, made it clear he’d just ported to some other world.

“How is it possible?” Arts asked, walking over to me. The expression on her face was priceless. This is probably how a savage cannibal looks at a moving car for the first time.

“Search me.”

“What kind of shit was that?” Traug asked, staggering toward us. “I thought my head would come off.”

“He’s a Protector,” I said. “The way I see it, this development branch allows him to conjure up any kind of protection at all — but only one kind at a time. That’s why he was sometimes vulnerable to magic and other times to physical damage.”

“Or the Gatekeeper’s spells,” Arts added. “As far as I understood, he has some totally different kind of magic.”

“Yeah, I noticed it too. He’s quite different, don’t you think? Has anyone noticed that instead of blood, he had—”

“D-d-dust,” Litius finished my sentence, walking over to us.

“It would’ve sounded more dramatic if you hadn’t stuttered,” Arts said. She was still shaken and jittery.

“Oh wow,” I said. “Well, we’ve all seen it. That was hardcore. What was he thinking of, attacking a Gatekeeper? Actually,” I looked around, searching the scene, “where is he?”

Indeed, the Gatekeeper was gone. All that was left of him were two trails of dust that led toward the Gatehouse.

Oh well. A thank you would have been nice, of course. You’d think that Gatekeepers would be a well-mannered bunch. But never mind. We’d better go and hitch a teleport with him before all the others awoke from their shock. Trust them to crowd us out and send us to the back of the line.

We headed for the open doors of the Gatehouse under the round sign covered with a fine weave of runes.

The Protector’s attack still worried me. Everything had happened so fast that I just couldn’t believe it. It meant that some Players could travel between worlds on their own. Hadn’t Hunter mentioned something to that effect? But what had really struck me was the fact that apparently, some Players were even stronger than Gatekeepers. Had I been on my own, that Protector guy would have made mincemeat out of me, with or without time rewind.

“What’s that, for crying out loud?” Arts cussed, reaching the door first.

I hurried to follow her inside.

At first, I couldn’t understand what could have made her so indignant. The place was still the same, nothing out of order. The walls, the roof, the torches — all present and correct. Even the teleportation stone was still glittering as if someone had just ported to another world. Everything was as it should be — with the exception of the Gatekeeper.

“Is he gone?”

“He’s wounded. He must have gone back to his own world to seek help.”

“What about us?” I asked, turning toward my friends. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m happy for him being alive and all that. But how are we supposed to get back home?”

Traug shrugged. “Use some other Gates. The nearest city from here is Rhetnor. Or Skirtsville, but it’s farther away.”

“Skirtsville,” I cringed, remembering the mind-boggling stench.

“Okay, let’s move it,” Arts jumped into action. “As soon as they find out that the Gates are shut, they’ll all head for the drivers’ depot.”

Still, I had to linger just a tad longer, because a few lines of text had just appeared before my eyes:

You’ve saved the Gatekeeper! You’ve earned the designation ***Gateway Visitor****. Your fare has been reduced 20%.*

“Is it only me?” I asked.

“Well, I’d be damned!” Traug announced cheerfully. “May the Zelsians kiss my hairy knees! I’ve got a 20% discount on all trips!”

“So it’s not just me.”

Arts shook her head. “We all have it.”

“The Gatekeeper must have made it to his world,” Litius said.

“Later, all later. Let’s go to the depot a bit quick, before they rent out all the snapdrakes.”

As I walked out, I ran into the first Player who must have been quick on the uptake. I gave him a smile and walked calmly past him and another couple of guys until I reached the end of the street where I stood waiting for my friends. Then, without saying a word, we broke into a run.

Unsurprisingly, Litius was the fastest among us, leaving us far behind. By the time we’d caught up with him, he was already at the depot talking to a driver. He appeared rather emotional and wasn’t even stuttering for a change. Still, as I got closer, I realized that his silver-tongued eloquence was wasted on the driver who didn’t budge an inch.

“You can search me, but I don’t have a single snapdrake in the stable. And even if I had ‘em, you wouldn’t be gettin’ ‘em. If they open the route to Rhetnor, no problem. But as long as our townhall bigwigs say nothin’, I ain’t gonna say nothin’, either. You can take a *burghur* to Skirtsville if you want. They still have six seats available. That’ll be seven grams each.”

“Oh no,” Arts rolled her eyes. “Not a burghur!”

“And if we walk?” I asked.

“It’s an eight-hour hike to Rhetnor. More if you walk to Skirtsville.”

“A burghur is just over an hour,” Traug said. “It’s a bit of a bumpy ride, so what?”

“Yeah right!” Arts grumbled. “A bumpy ride! Your tailbone will wish it’s never been born.”

“Sorry, I don’t have the time to walk,” I said, reaching for the dust. “It’s on me. Where’s that *burger* of yours?”

This proved to be the most reckless choice of transportation in my life. A one-hour bumpy drive in a rattling old Lada through the snowed-in Russian countryside at minus 20 F is a pleasure ride in comparison.

The burghur as it turned out, resembled a scaled-up rhino with a bigger broader head. An open wicker carriage was mounted on his back, full of passengers who were casting impatient glances at us. The beast’s only driver was sitting on his neck.

“How safe is it?” I asked Arts.

“Like riding a speeding motorbike,” he reassured me. “Without a helmet. Cross-country.”

A ladder was leaning against the creature’s flank. We climbed it, took our seats and had ourselves strapped in. The wicker tub actually proved sturdier than it looked — but still I had my doubts, especially after Litius in his eternal kindness had told us a couple of facts about burghurs while we were waiting for the two remaining passengers. I wouldn’t call his stories exactly motivational.

Like, he’d told us that burghurs were slow walkers but very fast runners. Which was why they’d been banned from the highway after a few deadly accidents when they’d successfully reduced the unlucky passersby to squashed bugs, then continued nonchalantly on their way. The townspeople weren’t amused (I wonder why). Which meant that we’d indeed be traveling cross-country.

I didn't get the chance to get properly scared. Predictably, once the local Players had gotten wind of the Gates being closed for maintenance,

they’d all gotten the same idea. The remaining empty seats filled quickly. I could hear the unhappy voices of those left behind while the burghur turned round unhurriedly, making me feel I was on some cheap and cumbersome funfair ride.

But then...

Then the earth and the sky swapped places. My heart dropped deep into my stomach while my bile rose to my throat. The rocky earth of Purgator thundered under the burghur’s elephantine gait — or was it my own insides rattling against my bones? All I wanted at that moment was for us to stop and take that walk. But you just couldn’t hear a thing in that mayhem — and unstrapping myself at full speed would have been sheer suicide.

If you think about it, life is filled with irony. Just recently I’d thought I couldn’t breathe in Skirtsville’s fetid air, but just after an hour, I was greedily breathing in the familiar effluvia, impatient for our journey to end.

Once the burghur had finally stopped, the driver helped us down one by one. The moment he let go of a passenger, he or she would literally drop to the ground, unable to focus, as the earth continued to dance a jig underfoot. A few Players nearby were busy saying goodbye to their lunch. I didn't have any in my own stomach, courtesy of the Beholder.

But here, not all was well either. Strangely enough, I was the first to notice the worrying signs. The chimney-dotted skyline over the local Gatehouse was clouded with black smoke, the ominous sign of a raging fire. As far as my Sharp Eye could tell, the two guards posted by the entrance were now missing. And the road leading from the Community to the Gatehouse was busy with a long file of Players loaded with their meager possessions.

I turned round to check on my friends. They did look worried: they too had already noticed the sinister metamorphosis.

“Is it my imagination, or is it that everywhere we go, things seem to take a bad turn?” I asked.

“Just a coincidence,” Arts said, as if trying to convince herself.

“If you say so.”

“Let’s go take a look,” Traug suggested.

“I don’t think so. Let’s wait for some of the locals to come back. I’d rather ask them.”

It took them another quarter of an hour to return. We weren’t the only ones who wanted to know what had happened: the other passengers who’d arrived with us were just as curious. As soon as the first person from that long file of refugees had come back, they were showered with questions.

“Stop asking me who it was!” he said, shrugging. “I’ve no idea! Some say it’s some mercs from the central worlds. They went to see Thol first. They spoke to him — or actually, they tortured him. There was screaming and so much noise.”

“Why didn't you try to defend him?” I demanded.

“Do I look like I’m a freakin’ kamikaze? Then they left and headed straight up. We hurried to check up on Thol, but his place was already on fire. The nearest buildings caught fire too — and here you go, a quarter of the Community’s burned down.”

“What about Thol?”

“What about him? He disappeared, didn't he? All that was left was a handful of ashes. It’s a no-brainer, really. It’s the central worlds again, trying to put the fear of God into us. Time to shove off. What a shame.”

“It’s not my imagination, is it?” I asked Arts under my breath, leaving the poor guy alone. “Everywhere we go, things do seem to take a bad turn.”

She gave me a long look. This time she said nothing.

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Chapter 21

FEW PEOPLE STOP to think about it, but the word “tune” can also be a verb. Which means we can control and attune our emotional noise. When it’s raining and the sun seems to have no intention of ever coming out, what prevents us from putting on a pair of warm socks, make ourselves some nice herbal tea and binge-watch an old series that we've long given up on? Before we know it, the autumnal blues in our heart is replaced by peace and inner quiet.

It’s like this with everything. Provided you know how to find the right key to your mood. Instead of going with the flow, you really should make an effort to change your disposition.

Which was something I had no desire to do at the moment.

The long day — which in fact felt like it would never end — seemed to be coming to an end. The gateway of the Community entrance was enveloped in night shadows, shedding them only occasionally whenever the odd passersby triggered the automatic light of the lamppost. My city, which normally wasn’t the prettiest sight in the gloom of a winter twilight, now felt like the best place in all of the possible worlds.

“Sergei, seriously, I could walk you home if you wish,” Traug suggested.

I looked at my friends. They all seemed to be pretty alarmed. Without saying a word to each other, we somehow knew that those “central world visitors” must have been looking for our sorry backsides. And they had plenty of choice, too. A mentate beastman was a prize a lot of serious people could be interested in. Or a girl who could in theory draw any object, transport it to another world, then materialize it there. Or take me — for all that we knew, they could have been after me too. A Time Master, the

proud owner of several Avatars, and just a good guy overall. It can’t have been for nothing that the Chorul had sacrificed himself just so that I could become a Player.

Traug was a notable exception though. A smuggler, a grave robber, a drunkard — not really the kind of guy that could end up on the radars of the powers that be. I suddenly realized I still didn't know his development branch. I could see his Berserk ability — but that was his racial attribute. All that my Insight could tell me about my friend was that he “gravitated to the Light side”. Which wasn’t much to go on.

“Traug, what’s your development branch?”

“Players don’t discuss that sort of thing, you know,” he replied, suddenly flustered. “I don’t really use it that much, anyway. Quit staring at me! You’d better tell me what we’re gonna do now.”

“What *can* we do? We’ve gotta go to Elysium. Now I have everything to get to the place we need.”

“So what about me and the fish eater?” Arts demanded defiantly.

“Just chill out. Whatever. Read something. You could use a book on manners. And Litius, a meditation manual. Just to make sure he doesn’t strangle one young lady who’s too sarcastic for her own good. That’s it, let’s split.”

“Well, in that case, let’s go and celebrate our safe homecoming,” Traug said, slapping Litius on the shoulder. “It’s not like we can’t afford it! Okay, Sergei, see you tomorrow.”

We shook hands, and the two left to indulge in some quality alcohol poisoning. Lucky bastards. Before, I used to drink beer after work just to unwind, but these days all I had energy for was a shower, and I was lucky if I managed to make it from the bathroom to the bed before I was flat out. I was completely devoid of desire for anything at all.

“Sergei,” Arts stepped closer to me and laid her hand on my chest.

Instinctively, I startled, unprepared for such a turn of events. My back went hot; I could sense my ears turn crimson. I was saved by my phone which just then started to vibrate like mad. Of course. We’d just left the Community, so I had signal back, and all the missed calls and texts started pouring in.

“Sorry,” I smiled, pointing at the phone, then buried my nose in the screen.

Talk about Armageddon, I had one on my hands right now. Sixteen missed calls from my Mom and Julia, with Julia being the more insistent of the two. Why did I have the impression that I’d reneged on a promise? There was something obscure and nebulous hovering in the periphery of my mind — but I couldn’t for the life of me work out any details. A bit like the face of an old friend whose name you just can’t remember.

The phone vibrated again, quite angrily too. Julia must have received the message that I was back online and ready to receive a dressing-down. I decided not to prolong the agony and promptly pressed *Accept*.

“Sergei?” Julia sounded a little surprised, as if she’d hit a brick wall at full run. “Where the hell have you disappeared to?” she continued in a whisper, apparently moving to another room. “You haven’t forgotten, have you?”

I instantly remembered everything. “No, no, not at all. Just a late day at work. My phone was dead.”

Dammit! I was supposed to go and see her, wasn’t I?

I brought the phone away from my ear and checked the time. Nine-ten. Her anger was perfectly understandable.

“Such a shame we can’t make it...” I began.

“What do you mean, *‘we can’t make it’?*”

Judging by the sound, my usually cool-headed Julia had disappeared into thin air, replaced by a furious Gorgon.

In all honestly, I could understand her. This was probably how sweet outgoing girls transformed into nagging bitches. It’s our fault guys for driving them up the wall!

“My Mom has cooked us a banquet!” she went on. “My Dad swapped his shift! You promised!”

I blew a heavy breath. She didn't need to rub it in, really. There’s nothing worse for a man than to hear that he’s reneged on his promise.

“I’m coming,” I said. “I’m gonna hail a cab now. I’ll be there in thirty minutes.”

“Please do.”

I hung up and hurried to open the taxi app in my phone. Oh, great. As usual, there was a traffic jam on the bridge. I hadn’t a chance in hell of making it in thirty minutes.

I looked up at Arts, suddenly remembering what had just happened between us. But all I saw was a sarcastic smile hovering over her lips.

“Whassup? Baby needs to go beddy-byes?”

“No, sorry, it’s just something urgent has come up. I completely forgot.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Did you want to speak to me?”

“Who, me? Not at all. Nothing that matters, anyway. Well, I’m off. See you tomorrow.”

She unhurriedly headed for the bus stop.

Now what the hell had it been? Women! What was going on in her head? Why couldn’t she just say it? What’s with the constant hints and double talk?

I didn't get a chance to get properly angry with her because the cab was already there.

I still had Mom’s missed calls to deal with. I absolutely hated to use my phone in cars but I just didn’t have an option. Whoever ignored Mrs. Demidov’s messages lived to regret it. A bit like sliding a landmine in your pocket and forgetting it’s there.

“Hello? Sergei? Why didn't you pick up?”

It took me a good two minutes to explain that modern phones had batteries which in turn had a propensity to discharge. My Lying skill hadn’t budged. Apparently, I’d already maxed it out where my nearest and dearest were concerned — including Julia. Which meant I might need to go look for new victims to level up my deception skills.

“Never mind. Now listen. You can’t imagine what just happened. It’s awful.”

“Just awful or *awful* awful?”

“It’s *awful* awful. It’s about Lily. Her Max has disappeared. He left home and never came back.”

“You don’t mean it,” I said, trying to fake surprise.

“We wanted to report it to the police but they said he hadn’t been absent long enough. So Misha went to his college, and you know what they said?”

No points for guessing. Still, I knew better than to disappoint Mom. “No. What did they say?”

“They’d never had a student of that name. So Misha pulled a few strings and checked the company where he was supposed to be working...”

“Let me guess. They’ve never heard of him, either.”

“No, but can you imagine? Our Lily very nearly married a conman! I’m absolutely speechless. Who would have thought?”

She went on and on about “some people and their lack of scruples”. I waited for her to stop to take in some air and asked, “How’s Lily?”

“Well, she’s upset. Who could have thought!”

“Okay Mom, I really can’t speak right now. I’ll go and see her tomorrow.”

“Oh please do. You know her — she never gets things off her chest. She just bottles it up. And this is a shortcut—”

“Yes, yes, a shortcut to a heart attack, I know, I know. Okay, Mom, I’ll speak with you later. Bye.”

I slid the phone back into my pocket and heaved a sigh.

I could only imagine what Lily must be feeling right now. You had to know her to understand this rational, secretive, imperturbable mind. So she’d fallen for a shitbag, big deal. Can happen to anyone. Good girls never seek the company of good boys — on the contrary. What exactly it is they

need remains a mystery. It takes some people their whole lifetime to grasp the simple truth that you should only love those who can love you back. And once the bad boy shows his true colors, they open the waterworks and cry their fill.

Not in Lily's case, though. Her brother, merciful in his cruelty, had beat the scumbag to it. Not that it helped Lily very much. Before leaving for the Community, I really had to pop by to see her and try to find the right words. Two things are really the worst: trying to comfort someone, and making a wish for one's own birthday.

I rested my chin in my hand and stared out the window.

Predictably, just as we'd reached the bridge, the traffic stopped dead. No, not stopped really: soon we began to crawl at a snail's speed which was good news: a couple hours earlier, we'd have been stuck here for an eternity.

"This is Vesti FM, it's eight-thirty p.m. in Nizhny Novgorod. Now for the latest breaking news—"

"Sorry, you mind if I listen to this?" I hurried to say as the cabbie was about to change the station.

He nodded. "Sure."

It's not that I'd suddenly developed a taste for our small-town reporting style. It's just that a needle of anxiety stung me in the chest; a hunch, if you wish. And after everything that had happened, I tended to trust sudden hunches.

"...The police continue to look for eyewitnesses to a mass street fight which took place in the Lenin District earlier today. According to the CCTV footage, about fifteen men attacked innocent passersby who hadn't provoked them in any way. The victims received minor injuries but refused

medical help. We're asking anyone who might have witnessed the accident to—"

Now why would they have refused medical help? And why did I keep getting this nagging feeling that they weren't just any passersby? Could they have been Players, by any chance? In which case, who could have attacked them — and it looked like a well-organized attack, too. Not good. Lenin District — that's where the Seers' new residence was, wasn't it?

Did that mean that the war had finally reached our backwater?

Questions and more questions. I really needed to check on my new friends the Seers. They seemed to have taken a liking to me. I might ask them what the hell was going on. Because we seemed to be on the brink of war, you know.

A nauseating feeling stirred within my chest. I recognized the urge. Now I knew: this war had my name on it.

I made it to Julia's virtually on the dot. Okay, ten minutes late, if that. I paid the cabbie, rang myself up and climbed the stairs.

Julia answered the door, looking very grim. I struggled not to laugh. Some people just aren't made to look serious.

"Dad's fallen asleep twice already," she reproached me. "Mom's worried. She keeps asking me what kind of job it is to keep you up at all hours. And just for once I agree with her..."

"We've got a big hot mess in our regional branch," I made a helpless gesture, kicking off my street shoes.

"Oh, hi, Sergei," Aunt Vera rushed out of the kitchen. "Are you straight from work? Do come in."

I heard the creaking of the couch, followed by the arrival of a slightly disheveled Uncle Kostya in the doorway. He must have indeed dosed off to the TV's constant mumbling. We exchanged a handshake, and I headed for the bathroom.[7]

"Here's a hand towel," Julia said, materializing behind me.

I tried to kiss her but she evaded my hug and thrust out her hand with the towel. Still angry, oh well.

Having finished my ablutions, I walked into the largest room where the dining table was already set. Julia was right: they must have been waiting me for quite a while, judging by the yellow sheen formed on the mayo topping of the Olivier salad. Someone had already picked at the dressed herring, then turned the damaged corner away to face the fruit bowl. Hah! That was something I myself would have done.

"I've just brought the mantu[8] to the boil," Aunt Vera said, returning from the kitchen into the room. "Sergei, help yourself to the salads in the meantime."

She didn't have to ask twice! Considering I'd only had breakfast that day, followed by a thorough stomach purge for lunch, a generous Russian dinner had come in really handy. It was a miracle how my plate had managed to accommodate it all: hearty helpings of the Olivier and the herring, some jellied pork, Korean carrots and some cold cuts.

Uncle Kostya raised a vodka bottle in front of himself, then pointed at me. I nodded my agreement. The fact that the booze turned out to be on the cheap side hadn't stopped me. It was my own fault I'd arrived to dinner empty-handed.

Ten minutes and three vodkas later, I pushed myself away from the table. Life was good. Maybe Hunter had been right by choosing a regular

human life for himself? Was all this traveling between worlds worth giving up day-to-day happiness?

“Sergei, you’ve got the remote next to you. Can you put it up, please? The news is coming on.”

“Kostya! This isn’t the right time!”

“But that’s the headlines!”

“Let’s take a look,” I suggested. “I’m curious, too.”

I listened to my Intuition but it kept mum. In actual fact, I’d already checked my phone’s newsfeed on my way here but they didn’t say anything extraordinary. The dollar kept rising; the Russian ruble was ready to take the brunt; some celebrity had divorced another, ending their long and happy marriage. That is to say, no news at all.

The headline news hadn’t offered much food for thought, either. Russia’s President in meeting; Russia’s President visiting a production line; the Prime Minister taking local officials to task for not complying with the President’s latest orders; a litter of tiger cubs born in the Sochi zoo. No terrorist acts or natural disasters whatsoever. One might think that the Horsemen had realized the error of their ways and regretted the whole depth, width, measure and degree of it, eager to start a new life free from sin. Sorry, I’m not buying it.

In that case, what was it? One thing worse than having an enemy was having an enemy who’d gone to ground. I don’t like cunning people, simply because they always end up stronger than the naïve gullible me. And the Horsemen weren’t just cunning; they were powerful Players experienced in the ways of crime. I had a funny feeling they could be very patient when they had to be.

And how was I expected to go to Elysium in this kind of mood?

“Here’s your mantu!” Aunt Vera announced, placing a steaming bowlful on the table.

I picked up two and chewed on them unenthusiastically. Not because I was spoiled by Bumpkin’s cooking, as these were really good. But firstly, I’d already stuffed myself silly with the starters, and secondly, I was too wound up feeling powerless to grasp what was going on. Which had ruined my appetite for me entirely.

“You like it?”

I forced a smile. “Love it.”

“Well, I’ll pack some with you to go, then. You live on your own and have no time to cook for yourself, do you? And some salad, too. Which one do you prefer?”

I sullenly pointed at the dressed herring. Bumpkin wouldn’t be amused seeing me with a doggy bag. He might actually shut the door on me. Then again, what made me say that? It was my house, after all. I had every right to patronize every street vendor in town if I wanted to, and bring their wares home with me.

I spent another quarter of an hour wavering between the two degrees of good manners — of not leaving too early nor too late. I watched the TV, all the while listening to Uncle Kostya’s running commentary, then started making parting noises. Judging by the overall mood in the room, the fatherly shoulder-slapping and a peck on the forehead from the potential mother-in-law, I realized I was as good as married. I hadn’t even noticed how they’d tied the proverbial knot for me. What would come next?

Honestly, I dreaded to even think. So I gave Julia a neat and chaste peck on the cheek, left the apartment and hurried downstairs for the cab that had already been waiting for me for the last five minutes. What was scarier: to steal a magic stone from under the Archali’s nose — or to get married? I had no answer to that yet.

Sunken into a pensive slumber, I finally reached what still was my bachelor den. I paid the cabbie and was about to duck into the hallway when I froze. Something wasn't right.

Actually, a lot of things weren't. The bench on which Mr. Petrov, our dear old Professor, used to sit, was now broken — snapped in two right in the middle, as if it had collapsed under the weight of a 600-pound French fries lover.

The lamppost that was normally lit at this hour was now broken. As I took a careless step, the glass crunched under my boots.

But the real cherry on the cake was to see two police vans parked up on the snowed-in lawn. Judging by the human outlines and the snippets of loud conversations coming from behind the front door, that's where all the fun was.

My hands shaking with impatience, I fumbled with the keys and unlocked the front door. I'd only climbed up one flight of stairs when a police sergeant stopped me: a lanky guy younger than myself in a badly fitted uniform.

"Where are you going?"

"Home. I live here."

"Which floor? Apartment number?"

I told him, patiently looking him in the eye.

Another officer walked down the stairs to join the sergeant, listened to his report and nodded to me, motioning me to follow him.

When we'd reached my landing, I faced what resembled a scene from an action movie. Three traffic cops stood with their heads tilted back,

looking up. Next to them stood Mr. Petrov's wife — I could never remember her name! — fumbling with the flour-smeared hem of her apron. All of them were listening to the inhuman, guttural wailing sounds coming from the fifth floor.

"Hi," I said.

The neighbor nodded back. "Hi."

I could detect apologetic notes in her voice. "What's up?"

"That's my Alex, isn't it? He's been drinking so much he started seeing things. He doesn't recognize anyone. When the cops had arrived, he attacked them!"

"Ma'am, please keep your voice down. And you, Sir, you'd better go home. We're trying to do our job here."

I looked at the guy's insignia. I could tell he was a lieutenant — but was he a second or first one? I seemed to have forgotten all from my school civil defense lessons. Still, he looked like he was the one giving orders, so I might have to use my top cheat, Persuasion Skills. It came with one particular argument that always seemed to work with commoners.

"It's just that I actually know Mr. Petrov quite well," I said. "He tends to listen to what I say. He once said I was like a son to him. Would you like me to talk with him?"

Your Lying skill has increased to level 15.

"He sent two of our guys flying down those stairs and bit one of them. He's huge. You have any idea what he's gonna do to you?"

"So what do you suggest?"

“Nothing. We’re waiting for the takedown team to arrive. They’ll take care of him.”

Okay. Now was the time to lay my trump card. “In that case, you’ll be here forever. I could just go upstairs and try to talk to him. If it doesn’t work, it doesn’t work. I’ll just come back down. What’s there to lose?”

Under normal circumstances, they might have told me exactly where I could stuff my offer, in as many words. Still, the Lieutenant gave me a wooden nod and stepped aside like a puppet on a string, clearing the way.

Your Persuasion skill has increased to level 19.

I had nothing to do with it, did I? So I just shrugged and walked up the stairs toward the wailing, howling Mr. Petrov. Time to find out what the hell was going on...

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Chapter 22

THE TRUE MEASURE of one’s wisdom isn’t in the number of errors one didn’t commit: it’s in the number of errors one managed to rectify. As long as you manage to gather the stones you cast away earlier, you’re doing okay.

What made me think of that, I wondered, as I gingerly opened Mr. Petrov’s front door — which was ajar anyway? The answer was simple: as I’d entered, I stumbled over the empty bottle of Iorolfin brandy I’d had the indiscretion of gifting him.

The already familiar sting of bad premonition prickled my chest.

Then I saw him.

The irony of his nickname — Professor — wasn’t lost on me. Okay, maybe not a Doctor as in Dr. Jekyll, but the man in front of me was definitely Mr. Hyde.

A half-naked, savage figure with bulging muscles, his veins so prominent as if they were about to burst out of his body — the usually stooping Professor was standing tall and proud which made him look not just taller but also more frightening.

“Hi,” I nodded, searching his blurry unfocused eyes for a glint of sentience. “I was just passing by. Thought I might pop in to see you. You’re drinking, aren’t you? I’ve got some food to chase it down with,” I set the plastic bag with Aunt Vera’s offerings onto the floor next to me.

The arrival of that new item hadn’t gone unnoticed by him. He seemed to have awoken; his eyes glinted predatorily as he studied the bag before turning his attention to myself.

His mouth parted in a wide grin that didn't bode well. A long string of dribble dangled from his jaws, almost reaching the floor.

“Mr. Petrov...”

“A-a-a-wwh,” the creature bulged its eyes, stepping toward me.

“Professor!”

“A-a-a-wwh!”

“Wake up, Professor!”

Although I’d seen my fair share of zombie apocalypse movies in the past, none of them had had this kind of opening. Probably because they hadn’t been produced by a Player.

Growling like a wild beast, Professor went for me, his hands reaching for my throat. Still, I hadn’t been born yesterday, either. I promptly ducked and dove under him, ending up behind his back. “Mr. Petrov!”

“A-a-a-wwh,” he turned round to face me again.

No, it was no good talking to him like that. I had to bring him out of that state — but how?

I gave myself a mental slap on the forehead. Of course! What had I been thinking of? I was an Illustrious, wasn’t I, so I had all the right cards right up my sleeve already!

I stuck out one arm in front of me and began enunciating in a singsong,

“*Exorcizamus te, omnis immundus spiritus, omnis*.... sorry, I can’t remember how it goes... I’ve only watched one season of Supernatural.”

Mr. Petrov didn’t seem to mind my memory lapse. Having waited for me to shut up, he bolted toward me. The brandy had definitely improved his Strength.

But still — and that was the beauty of it — I was more agile. I managed to dodge the attack, twisted his arm, pressing him to the wall and finally activated my newly-gained Healing ability, sending it down my arm.

It worked with an impressive display of special effects. My hand began to glow, sending a wave of something strong, magical and inexplicably beautiful toward the man. His body arced momentarily as if electrocuted; then it went limp, forcing me to grab him in my arms before he slumped to the floor.

His muscles slackened and began to shrink, as if deflating; the glint in his eyes disappeared, replaced by consciousness; and overall, the whole of Mr. Petrov seemed to have shrunk back to his original size. He was himself again.

“Sergei?” he asked, looking lost. “What’s going on in here?”

“You’ve drunk yourself blue, that’s all.”

“Oh really? I’ve always been watching my intake... Oh no! Have I done something?”

“Just kicked a few cops down the stairs, that’s all. Oh, and you bit one of them. And sent your old lady packing.”

“Oh, no!” he groaned, rolling his eyes.

I couldn’t really tell what had upset him the most: the problems with the police or with his wife. “It’s okay. Now do what I tell you, and it’s all gonna turn out fine.”

Your Persuasion skill has increased to level 20.

You’ve achieved Mastery in the following skill: Persuasion.

Mastery level: 2

You’re now capable of changing a commoner’s philosophy just by talking to them.

Warning! If the commoner’s character is in conflict with their new philosophy, its influence on their outlook won’t last.

“Do you have any alcohol in the house?”

“I wish! My old woman is a real mind reader in this respect. She can find anything anywhere.”

I rushed around his apartment in search of something suitable, until finally I saw a small watering can sitting on a window sill. I peeked inside: it was still half-full. Good. Today would have to be a real generosity show courtesy of my Avatars.

A quick Transformation of Liquids turned the water inside into vodka. I know, I know. I could have turned it into wine, I suppose. Still, as it were, vodka was more appropriate.

I sprinkled some onto Mt. Petrov, then handed him the can. “Drink this.”

“Sergei, I can’t... I need a glass. Also, it’s a bad sign drinking on one’s own.”

“Just drink it!”

He took a fearful swig, followed by a few more.

In the meantime, I began drilling him, “They’re gonna take you to the station now. Don’t say anything. Nothing at all. That way they’ll write it down as delirium tremens. You understand?”

He blinked slowly, still drinking from the can. I had to interfere and separate them. “Stay here.”

I walked over to my bag still sitting on the floor. After some deliberation, I picked up the whiskey bottle and stuffed it away. It was probably better to keep it away from prying eyes. Then I walked back downstairs.

“He’s all right,” I said to the lieutenant who still had that glazed-over look in his eyes. “He won’t be any trouble. And please, Comrade Lieutenant, don’t be too harsh on him. He didn’t know what he was doing.”

“No, he didn’t,” he said obediently. On his signal, the other cops ran upstairs.

I was about to head home when I had a funny thought. You may call it a practical joke if you wish.
“Oh, and one more thing, Comrade Lieutenant...”

“What’s that?”

“I suggest you check out something called anime. See if you like it. It’s very popular at the moment. Whole countries are crazy about it.”

“Anime?” he asked in surprise, staring blankly at me. “That’s funny. I think I heard about it but I never gave it much thought. Very well. I’ll check it out.”

Why not? How’s that for changing a person’s philosophy? If he didn’t like it, his mind would reject it anyway. But if he did, he might discover a whole new world for himself.

I still had the Professor’s wife and her profuse gratitude to handle. Having fought her off, I finally made it to my apartment. I locked the door and breathed a sigh of relief.

Well, I shouldn’t have.

The moment I turned on the light, I saw Bumpkin standing with his arms crossed on his chest, glaring at me.

“What’s this?” he demanded, pointing at the plastic bag in my hands.

“Hey, how about ‘Hi Master, great to see you!’?” I said, kicking my shoes off. “Haven’t you missed me?”

“Yeah right. You’re out all day jumping between worlds, and I’m stuck in here all alone! What’s in the bag?”

“Leftovers from a royal banquet.”

“Give it to me,” he took the bag from me and all but climbed inside. “What’s with all the mayo? And it’s not even homemade. What they sell in shops is not mayo, it’s a disgrace! You aren’t gonna eat this, Master, are you?”

I grumbled something back and headed for the bathroom. I turned on the shower, peeled off my clothes and started lathering myself. My side still hurt — it was as if Arts hadn’t healed it at all.

I touched the inconspicuous scar and winced. Very unpleasant. And why was the skin that funny greenish color?

“Bumpkin!”

My house goblin materialized instantly even before I finished calling him. He gave me a businesslike look, saw the wound and shook a

disapproving head. “Did you get this today?”

“Yes. Why is the skin all green?”

“The blade must have been poisoned, that’s why. That’s not rocket science, is it? Never mind. I’m gonna make you something in a minute. That should help.”

He disappeared. I heard the rattling of pans in the kitchen. I finished washing gingerly, trying not to disturb the wound which had closed but was far from healed.

As I walked out of the shower, I listened to the sounds on the stairs outside: nothing. Everything must have been over already. I unmade the bed and had all but climbed in when Bumpkin reappeared.

“Drink this.”

I knew better than to ask any questions even though the swill stank like a well-hung carcass of a coyote stuffed with a load of dirty socks. Bumpkin knew how to bring people back to their feet with his own take on folk medicine. You had to give him that.

“Now sleep.”

His hairy hand touched my forehead.

I went out like a light. It could be the busy day I’d had — or it could be one of his spells. You just don’t know.

Then suddenly it was morning again. It was as if I’d closed my eyes for just one second, only to open them to a totally different day. The winter sun, blinding bright but cool nevertheless, peeked through the window.

I stretched, sat up and listened to my body. I felt okay. I studied the wound. The scar was a dirty brown color but the skin around it was its usual

hue. Excellent.

“Bumpkin! Can we have some breakfast?”

“Sure, in a moment,” he said, walking in with an empty plastic bowl that I normally kept my dirty washing in. He set it in front of me.

“Bumpkin, what’s this?”

“That’s a bowl.”

“Very funny. What’s it for?”

“It’s for when you get sick.”

“Hey, what’s all this nonsense now? I feel great. I—”

The moment I got to my feet, my stomach curled into a knot. It was a good job the bowl was right in front of me!

Having purged my body of all the excesses — my ex-food was barely digested and of a very funny color — I finally wiped my lips and tried to stand up.

“That’s the toxins coming out,” Bumpkin explained. “It might be a good idea to stay in bed for a couple of days. But you just can’t sit still, can you?”

“No, I can’t.”

“So just remember you might get sick a couple more times. And I’d suggest you use the bathroom, if you know what I mean. Better do it now, or you might regret it later.”

I followed his advice. Finally, completely purged inside out, I took a shower and stumbled into the kitchen. Bumpkin set an omelet before me

and poured me some tea.

I felt funny. You know the feeling when you doze off early in the afternoon only to wake up late at night. I felt lost, sort of. Still, I finished off my breakfast and listened to more instructions regarding my well-being: no rushing around, no exotic food, and absolutely no alcohol.

“What were you thinking of, giving Iorolfin brandy to a commoner!” he reproached me. “Only Korls can drink it straight — but Korls are a bit crazy at the best of times. But giving it to a human being undiluted!”

I shrugged and sniffed the bottle which still had some dregs on the bottom. “How was I supposed to know?”

“Like everybody does! True, before they used to dilute it with other drinks. To give it to soldiers before battle, you know, to make them fearless. But not straight!”

“I know, I know. I won’t offer in-Game drinks to my neighbors anymore. I actually need to check on him. Not now, anyway. And why did you have to chuck out the food?” I added, looking at Aunt Vera’s plastic boxes, washed clean and sitting by the sink drying out.

Bumpkin only chuckled by way of answer, making it clear that my apartment had only one cook in charge of all the food. Not a very convincing argument, but as they say, you can’t argue with the hand that feeds you.

I called a cab. Lamentably, I seemed to be running out of commoners’ money. Bumpkin, too, started to moan that we were running low on food. Like, *‘Our stocks are dwindling, m’lord’*, that sort of thing. I very nearly put my foot in it by saying that he shouldn’t be cooking so much, but bit my tongue just in time. It wasn’t his fault I only came home to sleep — and besides, he really wasn’t himself just lately.

I put on my clothes, already washed and dried, even remembering the magic fur hat for a change, then slid out of the front door. The cab was already waiting, the driver's half-open window releasing wafts of cigarette smoke and the sounds of Russian rap music. I couldn't tell which of the two was worse. The good news was, it wasn't very far. Marshal Kazakov Street was only a few minutes' drive from my place.

Normally, I hate lending a shoulder to cry on, simply because I'm not very good at it. But in this case, it was different. I was responsible for my sister's woes — because I'd killed the fake "Max" for her.

Lily lived in a large U-shaped ten-story block of flats. Or J-shaped rather, because one of the building's enormous walls was much shorter than the other. This was actually a decent neighborhood conveniently close to the metro station — but still the place seemed to depress me. On the other hand, it wasn't as if I'd been coming here often. Once a year for Lily's birthday, maybe, if that. I hadn't been a very good brother, I had to admit.

From the eleven texts Mom had sent me, I already knew that Lily had taken the day off at work, that she was very upset and wouldn't speak to her, and that the cesspipe in her apartment needed changing. No idea how that was supposed to affect my sister's lamentable mental state.

Lily didn't even ask who it was, she just answered the door, disheveled, with no trace of makeup, wearing some baggy pajamas. She was now the opposite of her usual businesslike self, efficient and constantly on the go.

She shuffled into the kitchen and brought a large bag of potato chips. "Want some?"

"I thought you at least had enough style to drown your grief in quality champagne."

"Drinking is your thing, I'm afraid."

“Now I’m hurt. Whenever you feel low, you remind me of Darya. And that’s not meant as a compliment.”

“Sorry,” she scooped up a large helping of chips and managed to stuff almost all of it in her mouth. It wasn’t a pretty sight. “I know I shouldn’t say it but you’ve changed a lot just lately. You’ve stopped smoking and you seem to be working out. You look fitter somehow. Have you got a girlfriend?”

Oh those good old awkward heart-to-hearts with my family. I’d really missed them. “Actually, yeah, I have. But that’s not why I’m doing all those things. I just decided to take better care of myself.”

“And I... and I...” Lily began, sobbing.

I did the only thing I could do in this situation. I walked over to her and gave her a hug. We stood like that for a while without saying a word — or rather, Lily was sobbing and I was tapping her on the back.

“Why is my life all ass about face?”

“Are you kidding me? You’re the one Dad is proud of! You graduated with honors and now you’ve got the job of everybody’s dreams!”

“Yeah, for whatever good it does me...” Lily wept, smearing tears all over her face. “Why do I always get involved with assholes?”

“Well, statistically it can’t go on forever. Sooner or later, there’ll be a party on your street too. D’you know what you really need to do now?”

“Make sure I don’t gain fifteen pounds in one week, is that it?”

“What you need to do is think about something else. You need to put your head in order and take good care of yourself. And you know the best way to do that, don’t you?”

“Tell me.”

I smiled. “Jogging! In my opinion, evenings are the best. The best thing to do when your head is bursting with thoughts is to walk outside and start jogging. No need to rush. That way you might also burn a few extra calories too, because I think you’ve been overdoing it a bit just lately.”

I gently took the bag of chips from her. The smell made me queasy. “And as you jog, you start thinking of everything that has happened during the day, but it happens naturally and very gently, like in an energy saving mode, you know what I mean?”

Your Persuasion skill has increased to level 21.

Lily kept nodding. I wasn’t sure if she was taking on board what I was saying because she wasn’t the athletic type. Until now, she only had her good metabolism and excellent genes to thank for her decent shape. But now my new Mastery level 2 in Persuasion allowed me to change her outlook. Temporarily maybe, but that was exactly what she needed now. I had to drag her out of the four walls and show her a different world around her. I needed to convince her that her life was far from over, it was just a temporary drawback she had to survive.

Her eyes glazed over. “Jogging,” she repeated.

It took all of my presence not to avert my eyes. My sister resembled a porcelain doll now. I really didn’t like how this Persuasion thing worked, but what did you want me to do?

I slapped Lily on the shoulder, bringing life back to her gaze. “When are you going back to work?”

“The day after tomorrow.”

“What are you gonna do today, then?”

“I dunno. I might clean up a bit... or maybe go for a run,” her voice filled with surprise and excitement. “I haven’t gone for a run since high school.”

“Good idea,” I gave her another hug. “I gotta dash. I suggest you call Mom tonight. She’s worried about you, you know.”

“Will do.”

All the way to the Community I felt like shit. A big hot brown pile in a stupid raincoat. I’d come, I’d seen, I’d ruined my sister’s life. Had it not been for me, there would have been no need for “Max” to woo her. He'd have continued chatting up women of a certain age for fun and profit. And now his ashes had been scattered in the wind, Lily was self-medicating on carcinogenic carbs, and Sergei was beating himself up.

As I was about to enter the Community, I paused momentarily by the gate and cast a quick glance behind me. Predictably, I met Hopper’s gaze, the one who’d been stalking me by my house.

He wasn’t even trying to pretend he wasn’t following me. I’d have loved to teach him a good lesson — but he was a good hundred feet away and I already knew from experience that this self-appointed frog could leap over a two-story building at a moment’s notice.

The Community was surprisingly busy. And that wasn’t the “let’s-chill-out-and-have-a-couple-of-beers” kind of busy. I could tell that all these boys and girls had come here for a reason, and they were now checking the shops and craftsmen. Also, they seemed to come from every human ethnicity — a rare sight in our backwater Russian town — giving the impression that we were holding the Olympic Games or some other international event.

“Any idea what’s going on?” I asked Arts the moment I saw her.

“Nah. But I can tell you that it’s the Seers who run this show. I’ve just seen your buddy with that magic sword...”

“You mean Arthan?”

“That’s right. And lots of bigger fish, too.”

“Have you seen any Magisters? Or the Grand Master?”

“Nah.”

“Shame. I have a couple questions to ask him. Never mind. If they’re so busy, we might just as well be on our way.”

Much to my surprise, we didn’t have to waste time waking Traug up. He was already sitting on a bench by his house, looking rather the worse for wear. Litius was huddled up next to him, yawning his head off.

“So, gentlemen, are you ready?”

“Sure. Listen, S-s-sergei, if you d-d-don’t mind, I’d like to discuss the p-p-point of me and Arts c-c-coming along. Is it even worth it?”

“Oh yes it is,” Arts interrupted him. “It’s true they won’t allow us into Elysium. It’s not for the likes of us. But if these two bring a chase behind them, at least we can help the Gatekeeper to hold the fort. Right, fish eater?”

I chuckled. “They’re the words of a worldly woman. Let’s just hope it all goes quickly and without a glitch. I really don’t feel like fighting anyone.”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to. Seeing as Traug is with you. He seems to attract trouble.”

“So are we going or are we shooting the breeze?” Traug said. “It’s quite cold, you know.”

He said what? The weather was actually warmer this morning than it should be at the end of January. Was he nervous or something?

But of course. He used to rob graves in Elysium before, didn’t he?

“Yes, let’s get this party started,” I said. “All we need to do is go and fetch that wretched stone.”

Without waiting for the others, I headed for the Gatehouse. I just hoped that this Gatekeeper had stayed put, unlike the one back in Rhetnor.

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Chapter 23

IT'S COMMON KNOWLEDGE that power corrupts people. The sense of one's all-permissiveness and impunity can play a bad joke on our perception of reality. Especially if prior to one's rise through the ranks, one had spent a long time in the service of the powers that be. That's a recipe for disaster. That's exactly how you get people suffering from the "corporal syndrome" when the tiniest modicum of power goes straight to their heads.

And not just people, apparently. The same seemed to apply to Archali — because the moment we'd walked out of the Gatehouse, we immediately stumbled into one of those. He admittedly wasn't the beauty standard for his race: small (for an Archalus) with a hunched back, wearing some weird-looking eyepiece that lent him a semblance to a jeweler busy studying precious stones.

He squeamishly peered at Arts, focusing his lens, then switched his attention to the rest of our motley crew. His eye lingered on me though; I even got the impression he nodded his recognition. Of course. My Illustrious Highness had deigned Elysium worthy of a visit.

"No dark-karma Players allowed," he snapped.

We could have told him where to stuff it, I suppose. Even a humble pacifist like our Litius could have easily handled a puny individual like him. Still, he had an advantage in the face of two powerful dudes clad in armor — either city sentries or his own bodyguards. Those guys were top class. Which was logical, really, considering the importance of their frontier. Also, I had a funny feeling they weren't alone. There might be more Archali around just waiting for a signal to arrive.

"So," I smiled, "that's where we part ways."

Arts walked over to me, visibly embarrassed. “Sergei, please,” she said in a soft voice, “just be careful, okay? Both of you.”

“Don’t worry, babe,” Traug reassured her. “He’ll have me, won’t he? Don’t you want to kiss me goodbye?”

“I might want to break your nose,” she replied in the same soft, gentle voice.

"As you wish,” Traug said with a helpless gesture. “Let’s go, Serge.”

Litius nodded, knowing instantly what I meant. “We’ll wait here.”

We “cleared the customs” without much ado. No passport-stamping, no form-filling, none of that nonsense. They simply took our names down and asked about the purpose of our visit. When I said, “Visiting the most beautiful temple in the whole of Elysium”, Eye Piece gave me a look of mistrust but didn’t say anything.

Unable to conceal my excitement, I gazed at the eerie spires of Mylleth City spreading over the foothills below. Now I knew that all those pictures of Heaven hadn’t lied. This was It, exactly how it had been portrayed so many times before. Amid the picturesque sea of green so bright it made your eyes hurt lay a magical city which seemed to be made of pieces of marshmallow: tall white walls curved at fancy angles and burly Archali warriors posted on open towers.

“Quit gawking,” Traug said. “All of this is just Smoke’n’Mirrors.”

“It’s what?”

“You’ll see later. These feathered bastards love to show off. Follow me.”

I checked the map, just in case. If Clinger's marker was anything to go by, our little rock should be in the city somewhere. I couldn't lay a direct route because I hadn't yet investigated the area. But at least we could use the marker as a compass of sorts just to check our progress.

"Try not to gawk and don't let anything surprise you."

"You sound as if we're about to venture into a house of ill repute."

Traug didn't reply. He seemed to have undergone a transformation here, his usual cheer replaced by a grim determination. Next to him, even I couldn't but fall into a more businesslike mood.

"From what Litius found out in one of his books, Aarat Tkhel is a sacred garden," I said. "You have to be an Illustrious in order to gain entry, that's the reason for that karma requirement."

Traug nodded. "I already gathered that. It's not gaining entry that worries me, it's how we're gonna leave it afterward. Never mind. Let's just find our bearings first."

"Have you ever been to Mylleth?"

"Nah. It's too small for me. A Korl can't keep a low profile here."

I arched an eyebrow. This giant city that lay just downhill from us — it was too small for him? What was big, then?

In any case, I'd have loved to see the Archali capital. So far as I could see, Elysium was vastly superior to the neighboring Purgator. The latter created the impression of a long-abandoned place no one really cared about. All it had was rock, sand and meager vegetation. But Elysium was stunning in its riot of color; even white was a different kind of white, so bright and shiny it hurt your eyes to look at. And the Archali themselves in their suits of armor looked like some heavenly deities descending from the clouds.

“Where are they going?” I asked, pointing at the several V-formations of Archali soaring high in the sky.

“As if you don’t know. They’re going to Firoll to join the battle.”

“Isn’t it stupid to use Gates for attacking? I’m pretty sure the Kabirids are already waiting for them right by the Gatehouse. They probably have several garrisons permanently posted there.”

“Who says they’re going to attack them by Gates?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” Traug faltered, “I’m not a big speaker, you know. Before, we used to have Gatekeepers, right? You could only travel with their permission.”

“But then some of the Players learned how to travel between worlds without their help?”

“Exactly. No idea how they do it. But you saw it yourself, didn’t you?”

I nodded, remembering the Protector who’d disappeared right before my eyes. I had nothing to say to that.

“So both the Archali and the Kabirids got working on it. And it looks like they’ve found a solution. From what I heard, both have Gatekeepers of their own now — or rather, some guys who serve as such.”

“So that’s how the Archali deploy their troops to Firoll.”

“Yep. Apparently, things aren’t so rosy over there. They can only send a rather limited number of personnel at a time, and these guys who travel by regular Gates serve as reinforcements. They cram into the

Gatehouse like sardines in a can, wait for a signal and then attack. Although if the truth were known, they haven't had a big breakthrough in quite a while. They'd raid Firoll, then just retreat by Gates, all of them. Apparently, they haven't yet worked out how to travel back on their own."

"How interesting," I muttered. "So what do they do? Do they set up new Gates for themselves, without Gatekeepers? Or can they just teleport from any point in Elysium?"

"Search me. I'm just passing on what I myself was told. I don't know any details. So now that you've been here a while, how do you like it here?"

Good question. The world around me hadn't changed — but still it was different. The white of the walls had faded; the grass had lost its bright green sheen, and the burly Archali warriors had transformed into overweight dudes with wings. My initial euphoria had begun to abate.

"How weird," I said. "What was that?"

"Smoke'n'Mirrors, I told you. It's just the kind of air they have here. No idea how it works; I'm sure Litius would have explained it all to you. It's when you arrive here after a long absence, everything seems a bit brighter than it really is. Then once you adapt a little, you start seeing things as they really are. It's just some kind of effect. They call it Smoke'n'Mirrors."

But even despite that, Mylleth City hadn't lost any of its regal calm. The guards by its impossibly tall gates greeted us condescendingly, and the grandeur of its sky-piercing spires weighed down on us in their royal majesty. I walked along the smoky-white pavement half-expecting someone to point their finger at me and kick me out of this place on my ear. But no, no one seemed to be paying any attention to us.

"The whole city is paved with white sandstone," Traug pontificated, walking on, "which is quarried near Ladba by Kabirid prisoners."

Fascinated, I gaped at the many creatures scurrying past. A lot of them were Players from other worlds, Purgs included — but mainly they were Archali, so many you wouldn’t be able to count them all.

I momentarily lost my focus and walked right into one of them. “Sorry!”

Grumbling, the Archalus continued on his way. I chuckled. Now who would he remind me of? A certain ugly, clumsy Archalus with a broken wing...

“You okay?” Traug asked. “Feathered bastards. Let’s go.”

We walked out into a square which was especially busy. But it wasn’t the crowd that caught my eye but the tall poles lining the sidewalk.

Five of them had tall cages attached, their insides studded with sharp spikes. The cages were so narrow that the creatures locked inside couldn’t even sit down. A group of guards, all of them Commoners, surrounded the cages in a semicircle.

“Let’s go,” Traug said, tracing my stare. “These are criminals.”

“I didn't think they were the nephews of the local Mayor.”

“They’re sentenced to death. And it’s a very long and agonizing one, trust me. They have to stand in those cages under the scorching rays of Erchil until they die of thirst. Or until they faint and fall onto one of those spikes. Once they’re reduced to dust, the empty cages are taken down and one of the guards becomes a Player. Not the nicest punishment, I have to agree. Back at Noggle, we just stone our criminals to death.”

“Spare me the details, will you? It’s not as if I’m going to file a complaint with the Commissioner for Human Rights. The one closest to us isn’t human, anyway.”

That was true. The creature in the first cage was so enormous it barely fit in it, even though the cage itself was much bigger and stronger than its fellows. Even imprisoned, the bald-headed burly giant with greenish skin and an impressive set of fangs commanded a certain fear discouraging you to come closer.

Traug nodded. “That’s an orc. From Grimmar, most likely. It’s a long way away though. I’ve no idea what he’s doing here.”

“Well, I have. I think I even know his name.”

“Get away with you!”

“I’m serious. That’s Hirve. The Gold-Ringed Orc, remember? See that enormous gold ring in his nose? How many criminals are here now, five? That’s how many mercs there were in the first group hired by Clinger.”

“Well, that’s one problem less, I suppose.”

I shrugged. Apart from Hirve the Orc, the group also counted a Zverg, a beastman and two humans. Quite a motley bunch — and I had a funny feeling that each of them had brought his own particular set of skills to the table. If they hadn’t managed to steal the stone, it meant it wasn’t going to be easy.

We walked down a few more streets which weren’t as crowded anymore. I kept checking the map to make sure — quite anxiously, I have to admit — that we were getting closer to our destination. The map had scaled up considerably, showing the houses we’d just passed.

Finally we walked out onto a wide thoroughfare that led to a squat domed temple at a distance whose yellow stonework stood out dramatically amid the snow-white buildings.

“That must be Aarat Tkhel,” I said, remembering everything Litius had managed to find out about the place. “The ancient sanctuary that became the founding rock of this city.”

“Which doubles as the Gardens of Elysium,” Traug said, looking around.

This was the city center and the meeting point of the three biggest roads in Mylleth. They all ended in tall arches made within the thick wall that separated the city from the sanctuary. Anyone could enjoy the shade of the lush greenery and admire the exclusive flower beds. With one reservation: in order to enter, they had to be Illustrious.

But what surprised me most of all, there were virtually no guards posted around. The arches didn’t have built-in cameras scanning all who entered to check their karma numbers. How interesting...

“What the f—” Traug cussed, hitting an invisible wall.

“Traug, please. Put your hands down. You look like an evil clown overlord.”

I took a few steps and found myself to the other side of the arch. I ran my hand through the air but felt no obstacle.

“Traug, man, mind checking the area? Just please don’t go too far. Okay?”

He nodded. “Sure.”

I took another look around. It felt weird: there I was in the greatest sanctum of them all, and still people around me didn’t seem to mind. Two Players — a human man and a catwoman — were sitting on a bench, talking nicely to each other. An Archalus commoner was lying under a large bush, gazing at a bubbling brook; a few more were talking unenthusiastically nearby.

I resolutely headed for the temple.

I couldn’t but admire its ironclad doors spread wide, incredibly thick and large, which opened into a round sunlit hall. Four feathered guards froze at identical distances from each other, so big and plump they must have been raised on chicken food. Either that, or they were some kind of archangels. Their weapons and gear were top notch. Which basically meant one thing: you could only make these guys angry once. You just wouldn’t get a second chance.

Our quarry lay on a small pedestal at the center of the room.

Certhall. It just had to be, judging by its cold anthracite sheen.

My hand reached out toward it of its own accord. It took all of my willpower to snatch it back. I could only imagine what I must have looked like at the moment.

A big heavy tome lay open on a massive stand before the pedestal. I walked over to it and took a peek. Its pages were covered in squiggly abracadabra.

I gingerly turned a page. The symbols were different here. I leafed all the way through the book almost to the end until I finally came across familiar letters. The books must have been written in different languages; their only common denominator was in the fact that they were all spoken in Cesspit. Thanks to my Linguistics, I even managed to read some of it — even though it sounded like a machine translation. If I omitted the less intelligible phrases and cut down some of the longer-winded passages, this was what it boiled down to:

The Commander of the Legion, Varhail the Conqueror, lead battle for first city, Firoll. His hand rise high, his sword shine... magic stone of Gatekeepers alight on sword. Varhail fight like Kornean lion against five

Kabirids. He die, stone disappear. Many centuries later, stone is retrieven. Here it lie as treasure of Aarat Tkhel.

Your Axiology skill has increased to level 13.

Finally something. Apparently, all of the stones used to belong to Players with appropriate Avatars, which could explain why I, too, had acquired them without too much effort. Arthall went with Savior, Karthall with Destroyer and Certhall with Conqueror. What did matter was why it was called a “stone of Gatekeepers”? Had I misunderstood the writings?

I traipsed around the temple for a bit, then left it. One thing was clear: we couldn’t just walk in on the spur of the moment and take the stone. The guards just wouldn’t let us do it. I needed to sit down and put my thinking cap on.

I walked through the garden, making a note of two more exits through the arches. Then I went back to Traug and told him everything I’d seen.

“Four of them? We just need to wait until one of them walks off to take a leak or something. And then we just attack them.”

“Cool it, will you? You may be a great warrior but you can’t even enter the gardens. Or do you expect me to walk over to the guards and ask them to come out for a word? I’m afraid it doesn’t quite work like that. We need to find another solution.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know yet. I suggest we plant our backsides in a bar and give it a good think. If we can’t come up with anything, then we’ll just go back to Arts and Litius.”

Traug perked up. “Actually, I saw a nice tavern just next to the central square.”

I gave him a pensive nod, still thinking about Certhall. It was so close and still hopelessly out of reach.

There was this little voice within me that kept saying that the stone was rightfully mine and it could only belong to me (hello, Gollum). Still, I had no idea how to lay my hands on it. Not the slightest idea.

My gaze wandered over the broad street outside when I caught a glimpse of a strange-looking figure lurking in a side lane. An anxious premonition stung me in the chest. Good job I had my Intuition! Still, I showed no interest in the half-baked snoop for fear of scaring him away.

“Over here,” I pulled Traug by the sleeve, drawing him into one of the back streets.

“The tavern is further on,” he objected, indignant.

“I’ll tell you later.”

As soon as we turned a corner, I pressed a finger to my lips. Traug — who admittedly wasn’t the sharpest knife in the drawer at best of times — got the message this time and nodded, shrinking back into the wall. I froze too, listening.

I heard soft hurried footsteps whose owner was apparently trying to tag along while not attracting attention to himself. Then I saw him: the very same Archalus who’d pushed me out of his way a short while ago, the one who looked clumsy and out of place among his handsome brethren.

“Ouch!” the Archalus exclaimed as he tried to leg it — and for an ungainly creature like him, he was quite a decent runner.

[∞]

I darted toward the Archalus who was just turning the corner. He struggled in my hands like a scared bird, looking pretty pathetic more than anything else. I could quite understand him: everything had happened too fast, turning him from a hunter into the prey.

“Wh-wh-what do you want from me?” he finally asked.

“That’s what I should be asking you! I remember now! You walked right into me back at the square. Why are you following me?”

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about,” he said nonchalantly, trying if not to calm down then at least to get a grip and appear as cool as a cucumber.

“You haven’t?” I cast a quick look around and saw no one. “Then how about we give your wings a nice haircut?”

I pinned him down with one hand and reached into my inventory for my Katzbalger with the other. I had to really feel around for it — and still I couldn’t find it.

The Archalus found my efforts very funny for some reason. “You looking for your sword?” he giggled.

“You piece of dirt!” I drew the moon steel dagger from its shoulder sheath and pressed it to the Archalus’ throat. My vision darkened with anger; a terrible, all-consuming fury grew within me.

My face must have changed too because the Archalus looked scared now. “No, no! Please don’t.”

“Sergei?” Traug asked anxiously.

“Why did you follow us?”

“The letters!”

“Which letters?”

“The letters I stole from you,” he prattled fearfully. “I’m a thief, you know. My boss was very interested in those letters.”

“Oh was he?” I glanced into my inventory, just to make sure that the letters I’d picked up from Valfail, the father of the fake Max, were gone too. “So you decided to take the sword as well?”

“Oh yes. I showed it all to the boss. He started reading those letters and I think he saw something in them. In any case, he told me to keep an eye on you. And once I found out where you’re staying, he wanted me to give him the name of the place, so we could pay you a visit.”

“You know what we can do? I think we’re gonna pay your boss a visit ourselves. Take us to him.”

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Chapter 24

YOU SHOULD NEVER, ever make any rush decisions. Go for a walk, have a think, have a coffee or something stronger. Try to see the situation from a different angle, and only then try to make the right decision. Because this brief grace time might show you the gaps in your well-conceived plan. Most of the time, anyway. Like, I didn't even have to go very far this time — literally.

We walked past yet another house and started descending the stone steps leading down into the city's sewage system. That got me thinking. Where the hell did I think I was going? What for? I was going to have a chat with some shady crime overlord who was apparently interested in the late Valfail's letters. I had no idea what was in them.

Ditto for negotiating with the local mafia godfather. The surprise effect had its uses, of course, like when you rolled out a heavy machine gun against infantry. But for some reason, I had a funny feeling it was me running naked toward an approaching tank.

The only things that made me feel marginally better was Traug's silent presence by my side and some weird inner confidence I felt, bordering on arrogance. Part of me wanted to escape this place and run back to reunite with my friends in order to rethink and discuss our current situation. The other part of me, however, demanded I crashed into the Boss' house and showed him who the godfather really was here. From what I'd heard, these were the first signs of schizophrenia.

Torn by these soap-operaish dilemmas, I followed the other two to see the local bigwig.

Traug can say what he wants but Mylleth was a big city all right. Same applied to its sewage system. The Archali may have looked perfect,

their feathers all white and fluffy, their skin the most beautiful shade of bronze, but even such amazing creatures needed to poo, excuse my French.

Which I personally found quite a challenging notion. Walking along a river of, er, biological waste can't be very pleasant. Luckily for us, the ceiling was studded with grates which must have played the part of stormwater drains: it was only thanks to them that we hadn't yet fainted from the stench.

Prok — which was the name of the Archalus we'd so bravely grabbed by the balls — walked confidently in front. The further we delved into the maze of underground tunnels, the more confident he became. After yet another turn, we started walking away from the stinky river along a long narrow corridor, until we came to a squat, low-ceilinged room or possibly a lounge.

When I cast Light, I saw two more corridors: one leading to the left, the other to the right. Prok waved to us and beelined for the latter. He didn't even turn round, just dropped, "I'll tell the Boss you're here."

We'd have loved to follow him but a group of Archali stepped in our way. All of them looked much the worse for wear. By now, I was too used to the awesome sight of Archali warriors in shining armor, their powerful wings spread behind their backs, so the arrival of some puny guys, grim and bitter, threw me off my stride.

Their gray feathers hadn't seen water in quite a while; their dodgy clothes were like nothing I'd seen before; one of them was missing an arm, another wore an eyepatch. Six of them were commoners, with only one Player, a one-eyed guy whose nickname was apparently Crier.

"Stay where you are," the one-eyed guy said.

I recast the expired Light and studied the group again. "Are you thieves?"

“We prefer to be described as ‘liberated from monetary superstitions’.”

I nodded. “That’s thieves.”

That was funny. Initially, I’d had no intention of pissing him off. But the longer we kept talking, the stronger was that alien feeling inside me, weird and unnatural. Don’t get me wrong: I’m always the first to add a pinch of sarcasm to a friendly conversation but I’d always done so with no intention of hurting other people... or other creatures, as the case may be. But now I really wanted to see this Crier lose it. Also, I had a hunch that beating them in a fight would be a piece of cake.

“Don’t get me wrong,” I said. “I’m not a paragon of virtue either. The other day I smoked two Archali one after the other. I thought you guys were better trained.”

One of the commoners clenched his fists. By now, my common sense was screaming at me, telling me to zip it. But that strange entity within me had already awoken, and there was no way I could stop him. “My friend here, he’s a grave robber, imagine.”

“Sergei, you really gotta shut up,” Traug murmured.

“He used to steal Angel dust and sell it to Kabirids.”

Now it worked! Two of them drew their weapons. Then again, I’d hoped for some swords, not these toothpicks that they called knives. Thieves! What could I expect?

“Our Code has nothing to do with this,” Crier said, raising his hands in a conciliatory gesture while making a sign to his men. “Which means it’s none of our business.”

I just couldn’t hold it any longer. I dashed forward, feigning a punch and landing a nice hook on his cheekbone with my other hand.

Your Hand-to-Hand Fighting skill has increased to level 10.

You've achieved Mastery in the following skill...

A surge of pleasure laced with adrenaline ran through my body. Then it was all over. It was a bit like a drug addict's rush had run its course, allowing me to think clearly.

[∞]

"... Which means it's none of our business."

I swallowed the lump in my throat and turned to Traug. The poor bastard had already donned full combat gear complete with a sword and shield. Talk about me putting a foot in my mouth.

Luckily, Prok's arrival put an end to this awkward standoff. The clumsy Archalus walked past his brethren and waved to me. "Let's go. The Boss is expecting you."

"*Please* stay cool," Traug whispered to me without removing his armor.

"I've no idea what made me say that."

Which was true. I really didn't know why I'd had to push it. I'd always been wary of troublemakers who got into drunken arguments. But there I was, sober as a judge, and still I'd very nearly picked a knife fight.

But the creepy little voice inside me raised its ugly head again, whispering, "You would have beaten them."

We walked down one of the corridors toward a large spacious room. Although it had no windows, the walls were lined with sconces filled with

glowing green fungi. Their diffused light allowed to see almost the entire space: the long table and the Archali sitting all around it; a pile of barrels heaped up in a corner; a neat stack of massive ceiling beams at the opposite wall; a bunch of wicker baskets and a broken horse cart (I'd have loved to know how they'd managed to get it in here and most importantly, why). Honestly, the place looked more like a rundown junk shop rather than a thieves' den.

The Boss seemed to be presiding over his feathered brethren. He was arguably the most picturesque Archalus I'd ever seen. He wasn't particularly impressive, on the contrary: he was puny with a large belly and a scar running across his cheek. His right wing was missing and his left one, broken in several places.

And still he seemed to be projecting such confidence and power that I felt like a little boy in his presence. Which I probably was. But most importantly, his face seemed vaguely familiar.

I studied his entourage. Seven Players, including two Purgs and an Abbas. And about the same number of commoners, plus the earlier ones who now followed us into the room. So much for the power balance. Now was the time to shut it and remember my manners.

"May Erchil illuminate your path, o traveler, wherever you go!"

"And you too... I mean, may Erchil light it up..."

"Take a seat," he pointed at the bench next to him. The Archalus sitting on it rose without saying a word and moved down the table. All the others stirred, freeing up some space for us.

"Tell your friend he can remove his armor. You're our guests, not prisoners."

We slumped onto the bench. Immediately two wooden mugs appeared before us, filled with some indescribable moonshine. Traug tasted

it warily but thought better of it.

“My name’s Tarinfil. I’m the head of this little operation. We call ourselves a ‘Firm’. I need to talk with you. You had some letters, didn't you?”

“You mean the ones pilfered by your man — er, I mean, your Archalus? That’s right. I also had a sword.”

“I don’t care about the sword, even though it’s admittedly a curious item,” he produced the Katzbalger and laid it on the table between us.

I retrieved the sword and shoved it down my inventory.

“Now, the letters—” he began.

“I’ve no idea what’s in them. I don’t speak Archalussian. I got them off a Player.”

“And that’s exactly who I’m interested in. Because I know who wrote the letters,” he held a pause like an actor building up to a dramatic effect. “I did. All those letters, I wrote them to my son. That’s why I’d love to know how they ended up in your possession.”

I gulped. Talk about Murphy’s law. I mean, what was the probability of me running into Valfail’s father, of all people (or rather, of all Archali)? I wished I could have chanced upon the Luck ability instead of Intuition.

Never mind. What options did I have? Deny everything? I glimpsed the little black appendages on the Abbas’ head twitch. Shit. No good lying in the presence of that living lie detector. Never mind. Let’s do it.

“They were dropped by a Player I’d killed.”

“So Valfail’s dead, then.”

The Archalus took the news well despite the reflection of desperate grief in his eyes. The one to his right proved less patient. He jumped to his feet and even drew his weapon: a long-spiked mace.

I probably would have handled him myself — but Traug had other ideas. He parried the blow with his shield and gave the Archalus a gentle shove which sent him backwards onto the table, breaking a couple of plates and jugs.

Before he could scramble back to his feet, the boss brought the situation back under control.

“Altra!” he thundered.

Several pairs of hands grabbed the offender.

“Beringil!” Boss jumped to his feet. “You’re bringing shame upon my name!”

“He killed my brother! He killed your son!”

“We will bring him to account for that. And if he did so on the sly, he will regret it,” his eyes were now darker than a thundercloud. “But no one will try to kill anyone who seeks to see me before they speak!”

“Your weakness rubs off on all of us! Very soon the Daggerists will dance a jig on our bones but you’ll just let them do it, won’t you?”

“Take him away!” Boss thundered in such a terrible voice that even the sewage rats stopped their scratching behind the wall.

Once his sidekicks forced the struggling protester out, Tarinfil slumped back onto the bench. “I’m not going to apologize to my son’s murderer. But I will apologize to my guest for the insult that my other son dealt him. His behavior is disgraceful. Still, Beringil and Valfail used to be very close even before I disowned Valfail. That’s why his brother’s death

affected Beringil so mu—” his voice broke. The old man fell silent and lowered his head.

When he brought his emotions under control and looked up at me, his eyes glistened wetly. “Now tell me how you met my son and how he died.”

It would be stupid to keep anything away from him. Or to lie to him: the abbas was so busy twitching his black appendages I was afraid he might rise into the air like a copter.

So I told him everything. How I’d first met the fake Max at my parents’, posing as Lily’s fiancé. How he used her in order to blackmail me. How we set up a trap and killed him.

As I narrated the events, it suddenly dawned on me that they could be viewed in a totally different light. And in a father’s eyes, the death of a son wasn’t really a fair punishment for extortion. That’s why, once I’d finished, I cast Boss a wary look. Traug tensed up too, ready to leap to his feet at a moment’s notice.

As soon as I’d stopped, the abbas rose to his feet, walked over to his boss moving very softly, and started whispering in his ear. The half-minute that it had lasted felt like eternity.

Finally, Boss raised his hand, motioning the black creature to step back.

“You killed my son,” he said without looking at me, crossing his arms on his chest. “But it was him who came to you, not vice versa. I know Valfail well enough. You wouldn’t have had any peace with him constantly around. Once he sensed big profits, he could do anything. I’m not justifying what you’ve done, but I do understand your decision to relieve him of his life. I have no claim against you. If you need anything that’s within our remit, we’ll do that for you.”

I very nearly blurted out, ‘Help me to steal Certhall,’ but bit my tongue just in time. Somehow I doubted that was ‘within their remit’, as they’d put it. Having said that... it wouldn’t hurt to get the lay of the land.

“Why did you disown Valfail?” I finally asked.

He didn’t like the question in the slightest. He frowned, his remaining wing twitching as if preparing to carry him away from the curious intruder. Still, he spoke:

“There was a time when I ruled over all the thieves in this town on my own. We were a bit like a guild, if you wish, with our own unwritten laws which we called the Code. We never stole from each other, we never shed blood, we had no dealings with authorities and only agreed to the jobs which required agility and sleight of hand. But then *they* came. A bunch of young Archali from the capital city, cheeky and daring, who called themselves Wings and Daggers, or just the Daggerists. The reason for that name was their habit of leaving a dagger at the crime scene.”

At those words, a few of the Archali spat on the floor in disgust, not bothering to conceal their dislike of the competition.

“They didn’t scruple at the most despicable jobs, like beating people up, bullying and mugging. I’ll tell you more: their leader made friends with the guards’ captain. At that point, we were really suffering. The Daggerists made it clear that the city could only have one firm — and it wasn’t us. Together with the corrupt captain they drove us from our turf and robbed us of virtually everything we had. I used to have over two hundred creatures from various worlds under my command — and now I don’t even have thirty! But they are the trustiest ones. Those who didn’t betray me.”

“What did Valfail think about all that?”

“He believed that we should fight them using their methods. He insisted we kill the Daggerists’ leader. He disobeyed me. He betrayed our

code of honor — and he failed the task, too! For six months he was hiding from me all over Elysium, and then he came back. But I banished him.”

The old man’s voice quivered. He coughed to clear his throat, then went on,

“That’s why when I saw those letters, I hoped he was back. I thought he’d entrusted them to someone in order to give them back to me. But it didn’t turn out like that at all... Never mind. You’re my guests. The food’s on the table; help yourselves. As for spending the night.. if you’re indeed so desperate that you can sleep here, my boys will show you where you can crash.”

He was about to get up and leave — but I didn't count on that!

“Wait a sec,” I said. “Didn’t you try to do something about those Daggerists?”

“What can we do? We’re old school. Our methods don’t work anymore. We’re not hired killers and we’ll only fight if our lives are in danger. And pure stealing just won’t cut it, I’m afraid.”

“But don’t you understand?” I scrambled to my feet. “We could simply set them up! Didn’t you say they leave daggers at crime scenes?”

Tarinfil chuckled. “That’s one of the biggest mistakes youth can make, thinking that everybody around you is stupid. We did try, didn’t we? We cleaned out Lootfiil's store and Sariil’s gryphon shop. We stole all the swords in Dyphon’s smithy! Everywhere we went, we left those stupid daggers. And you know what?”

“No.”

“Nothing. The guards’ captain covers the Daggerists’ asses the best he can. They’re as thick as thieves now, if you’ll excuse the pun. It’s been years that we have to subsist on picking pockets on the square. We’ve been

driven to live down here in the sewers. They sort of used us as an example for all the others. They view us as some sort of funfair clowns and make jokes about us. But we can't change it, I'm afraid. Our code of honor is all we've got left.

"I'm not asking you to kill any Daggerists," I said. "But I could offer you a chance to win your former glory back. You only need to do one thing. But first—"

I donned my Avatar and looked over the group. Oh wow. There wasn't a single Darkie amongst them. I'd never seen such a bunch of holier-than-thous huddling together in a sewer. And not just that — the guy called Crier was shining like a flippin' LED bulb. Which could only mean one thing.

"You all belong to the Light, don't you?"

"Karma is a funny thing. You can steal from someone only to spend the money on good deeds."

I chuckled. "Yeah right. Tell it to our members of Parliament. They all seem to think they're Robin Hoods reincarnated."

"What did you say? How do you know of Robyniil the Hoode?"

My jaw very nearly dropped but I promptly shook my head, steering the conversation back on track:

"I don't. It's irrelevant, anyway. One thing's for sure: while this captain of yours keeps covering the Daggerists' backs, it's pointless trying to fight them. In which case—"

"We're not assassins!" Tarinfil snapped.

"Good. We're not gonna kill anyone, anyway. All we need to do is to bring your corrupt coppers under the radars of their rat squad."

“Sorry, I’m not sure I understand your human language very well. You’re using some strange words.”

“All I’m saying is we need to point their internal affairs department in the right direction. Meaning, their own police force. And once we do that, we could set them on the Daggerists.”

“How would we do that?”

“Easy. By stealing something of such great value that would generate a lot of hoo-ha, not just here in Mylleth but all over Elysium. And I think I know of just the thing.”

Boss slumped back onto the bench. “Tell me.”

I shared my plan with them — the plan which I’d admittedly only just thought up. And judging by their intense attention, I could see they were dying to find out what it was about. Some of the Archali who didn’t speak human languages very well (how’s that for linguistic haplessness?) kept pestering those sitting next to them to translate, much to the latter’s annoyance. The poor appendages on the abbas’ head went completely haywire.

So I talked and talked, and talked some more. And once I’d finished, I reached for my beer mug to quench my parched throat, feeling accomplished.

I was yet to see the Archali’s faces, including their leader’s scarred mug. I was yet to find out the degree of their amazement. But I was pretty sure of their positive reactions, simply because I’d just received a brief one-liner:

Your Persuasion skill has increased to level 22.

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Chapter 25

THE MOST BRAZEN and reckless of plans normally work simply because they *are* reckless and brazen. We love to overcomplicate things, which is why we often reject a simple plan as too primitive to be feasible.

But that's exactly how things normally work! It's much easier to believe that a certain girl will never agree to go out with you, rather than to walk over to her and introduce yourself. Even if the first few girls send you packing, the ninth one just might accept your invitation. All you need to do is be confident with just a healthy dose of dare.

Which was exactly what Crier and I got busy doing. He turned out to be a calm and confident individual, very experienced in the art of thievery. Had we known that he was only a few steps from becoming an Illustrious, we mightn't have even needed to level my own karma up. Things really had worked out in our favor.

"You sure you'll be able to get away with time to spare?" I asked him.

For some reason, everybody in the street turned to look at us.

Unperturbed, Crier pointed at his own ears. Oh, damn. I pulled out my ear plugs which I'd apparently inserted way too early.

We were just approaching the entry arch, camouflaged like chameleons on steroids. Both of us were wearing capes, the only difference being that I was also fitted with a fake hump supposed to imitate a pair of folded wings. Why? — Because creatures of other races — be it Purgs, Korls or humans — weren't welcome by the Daggerists, and both Crier and myself were now posing as part of their gang. In this situation, their racist

habits played right into our hands — provided my hump didn't slip, of course.

"Don't worry about me," Crier said calmly. "I've mastered Stealth to level 8. I'll lure the guards away and lead them in the other direction. Then I'll just disappear and catch up with you by the sanitarium in the Old Town."

Nodding, I checked the map one last time. I was just about to open my mouth when he promptly replied to the question I was just about to ask.

"I'll make it. I've mastered Athletics to level 7."

I looked him over. "I wouldn't have thought so."

"When you spend your whole lifetime running from the guards and if you can shin up any roof within seconds, sooner or later, the Game will pay dividends."

"What do you know about the Game?" I blurted out.

No idea what had prompted me to ask him such a thing. By then, I just had so many questions in need of answering. Which world did the Gatekeepers come from? What was the nature of the dust? How could Players become Gods? And was there an endgame or some final purpose of their existence? In other words, as a commoner, I used to ask myself one set of philosophical questions which I'd now traded in for a whole nother one.

"The Game," Crier replied with a hint of a smile as if I'd just said something very funny. "This is only one of its appellations. Many experienced Players prefer to refer to it as the Journey. That's what makes us real Seekers."

"So what is it that Players seek?"

“Each to their own tastes and needs. Some seek power, others control, yet others enlightenment, recognition, fame, or solitude.”

“What do you seek?”

“Nothing whatsoever. I’ve already found it all. Now you can put your earplugs in. You still remember what you gotta do?”

I nodded. I pulled my hood on and plugged my ears with some cotton wool that one of the thieves had doused in magic earlier.

The world fell silent. Or to be completely honest, I could hear the flow of blood coursing my veins. I wouldn’t call it exactly inspiring — if anything, it was spooky. Still, Crier’s customers were going to have it a lot rougher than that.

The celestial gardens seemed to be well prepared for the arrival of the two stooping pilgrims, capes up to their ears. The place had probably never been that busy. A large cluster of young Archali were lounging along the stream. A group of three middle-aged Purgs were walking to and fro nearby. The approaches to the temple were crowded by what looked like a guided tour. Just our luck.

Honestly, all of that had taken the wind out of my sails. You know the spiel: “I’m not a coward, I’m just shit scared”. Life seemed to be introducing a whole bunch of new criteria to thwart our well-laid plans.

Still, Crier kept barging forward just as confidently as before. The bastard must have sensed my mental state because he supported me under the elbow — gently but firmly, a bit like those men with kind eyes and stern faces that make up law enforcement services.

We walked past the crowd blocking the entrance and made our way inside.

Nothing had changed since I'd last been there. The four Guards; the anthracite-colored Certhall; the book in front of it. Luckily for us, there were no prying eyes inside the temple. Everybody must have already seen the relic and left for a breath of fresh air.

Knees trembling, I ambled over to the book and leafed through it, pretending to be looking for something, then turned to steal a glance at Crier. He stood rod straight, legs akimbo, in an apparent attempt to attract all attention to himself.

Or rather, to distract it from me.

I blew a fitful breath and nodded. Let's do it!

Crier opened his mouth.

The sound that came out of my Illustrious friend's mouth could have put Luciano Pavarotti to shame. It was as if the fabric of reality itself curved around him.

The Guards too seemed to have appreciated his performance. They grabbed at their heads covering their ears, squirming and opening their mouths like landed fish. Poor bastards. As if that might help them.

I took a few unsteady steps and picked up the rough stone.

Certhall (Divine Stone)

It looks like you've already met.

Of course I had. Come to daddy, my precious.

For a split second, I forgot where I was. Euphoric, I all but reached for the two other stones, Arthall and Karthall, in order to join all three together. The only reason I hadn't done so was because this new stone was

so delightfully heavy, its rich splendor superior to any amount of the finest jewelry.

No idea how long I'd spent just standing there until I finally realized something was changing around me. I turned round. The Crier's voice was getting weaker, which was understandable because he didn't have an infinite supply of air in those lungs. And the moment he stopped, there was no knowing what the Guards might do. Although still frozen in their places, they had already stood up and glared at him maliciously. I wouldn't have liked to still be here once he stopped his wailing. Had I been a Christian, I would have made the sign of the Cross.

I slid the stone into my inventory, retrieved the dagger that Boss had given me, dropped it on the floor and darted for the exit.

I barged my way through the crowd still blocking the entrance. No good staring at me like this, guys. You never know, I might just be in need of the bathroom.

As I ran, I glanced back — and I really didn't like what I read on their faces. Sorry guys, I'm not a thief. Just one of those things.

Interestingly enough, my Karma numbers hadn't dropped. Did the Game really think that robbing the robber was a good thing? Well, we have to be grateful for small mercies, I suppose.

I pulled out my earplugs. Once again, the world filled with sound.

What a change! Firstly, the place was filled with shouting. Secondly, I could hear the stomping of heavy boots coming from somewhere. Thirdly, Crier wasn't screaming anymore. And fourthly, a commandeering voice thundered in the crowd:

"It's that one! He stole the holy relic!"

Now I realized I wasn’t the only one running. Several Archali had left the crowd: the one closest to me darted after me on foot while two more unhesitantly took to the sky.

Oh well, good luck to you guys! I wasn’t at all worried about my navigational skills. Although we’d only gone this way once, I was now guided by the barely noticeable little flow of air that came with the Map Making skill.

Your Athletics skill has increased to level 13.

Soon I made it to one of the narrow side lanes. Now there was no way they could get to me from above, thanks to the proliferous vines bursting out of mezzanines and a chaotic tangle of beams bridging the opposite houses. Further on, where the buildings got higher and the streets ever narrower, no bird’s eye would be able to see all the way down.

So at the moment, my only other pursuer was following me on foot. I needed to lose him ASAP — because I was only a block and a half away from our meeting point next to the entrance to the sewers where Traug and the thieves were supposed to be waiting for me. Oh well. Let’s use the good old trusted method.

I dove into a blind alley and clung to the wall, trying to catch my breath. Just giving up smoking apparently wasn’t enough; I still had to work on my breathing because right now I wished I could cough my lungs out. Not easy!

My pursuer wasn’t long in coming. There was something in the sound of his footsteps I really didn’t like. They were a bit too creepy for my liking.

I knew that my first blow wasn’t going to work. Attacking an enemy blindly counting on your luck alone would have been utter nonchalance. I was quite prepared to activate my first time rewind, so the moment my fist

glanced off the guy's shoulder, I unhesitantly traveled four seconds back in time.

[∞]

This time I did it better, landing a couple of blows before I screamed out in pain as he punched me hard in the solar plexus with a spiky knuckle duster. Dammit!

[∞]

Now I was really angry. I invested all my strength into my punches, then dodged his counterattack and added a nice hook for good measure.

Your Hand-to-Hand Fighting skill has increased to level 10.

You've achieved Mastery in the following skill: Hand-to-Hand Fighting.

Mastery level: 1

Every third blow to your opponent's head in a combo will result in a knockdown.

Good enough. I cast one last glance at the Archalus lying on the cobblestones. He seemed to be stirring. I breathed a sigh of relief and jogged on.

A shadow flitted overhead. I dove under some dry ivy and froze, waiting. Just as I'd expected, my winged pursuer hadn't noticed me. Now I slowed down and trod carefully in order not to attract unwanted attention.

At the meeting point, Traug, Boss and six more Players — who must have been his closest entourage — were already expecting us. Boss

ran out into the street and grabbed me by the shoulders, his every motion betraying his impatience.

“And?” he demanded with a feverish glint in his eyes.

“Did it by the book. Stole the stone, left the dagger.”

He nodded. “Excellent.”

Still, I could see he appeared confused.

“What’s up?”

“It’s my son, Beringil. He had to come here too. I told him to. But he’s not here yet.”

I heaved a sigh and drew my Katzbalger. “I wish!”

Traug, too, had already assumed a combat stance, slightly stooping and raising his sword before him.

That said, I doubted he’d be able to single-handedly stop the approaching city guards: thirty fine guys, not counting their burly leader. Beringil was trotting alongside him like a lapdog.

“You,” Boss managed.

“I’m afraid, your time is up, old man,” Beringil spurted out. “You were offered the chance to join a powerful firm and make something of yourself. But you’d rather go your own way, wouldn’t you? And when you pardoned my brother’s killer, you just left me no choice.”

“Spare us the family drama, will ya?” the guards’ burly captain jeered.

He did look different from all the rest. His clothes were better decorated, his red satin cape almost sweeping the ground, his left hand resting on the hilt of his sheathed sword. His every word and gesture betrayed power. He ruled this place, and he knew it.

“See what I mean?” he said, turning to one of the guards. “There was no point asking the general for reinforcements. Had we done so, we’d have had to explain to him why we’d had to put up with these pickpockets for so long.”

“Which is probably for the better,” I said, surprising myself. I’d had no intention of alienating them — but the words had just came out of my mouth. “You’re all Players. We won’t even have to hide your bodies. No one will ever find out where you died.”

“Ah, so you must be that smartass,” the captain said with a smile, drawing his sword. As swords went, his was pretty awesome.

“And your name must be Captain Obvious, I suppose.”

I may have been mocking him but I’d already cast a couple of Mantles and another couple of Veils on myself. I shrugged off the stupid humped cape and spread my numb shoulders, enjoying their freedom.

Even though the thieves weren’t trained fighters, they showed their best side, drawing their toothpicks, and were readying to fight. To tell you the truth, I’d had my doubts about them. But even Boss drew his ancient backsword and knitted his brows.

The captain chuckled. “You’ve made a very big mistake. I had no intention of killing all of you. I was quite prepared to spare the old man and this half-blood,” he said, pointing at me.

“Sure,” Boss said with a smirk. “You’d just rather torture us.”

“Well, it’s not as if this place has a lot of entertainment. Never mind. Enough swan songs! Kill them!”

I sniffed sarcastically because I’d already donned my Avatar. All I had to do was stretch my arm out with the palm down. Shame I’d had to remove the cape: it somehow felt more befitting for a Savior than my trendy fitted raincoat. At least the effect turned out to be quite spectacular.

My “worshippers” — a bunch of Archali nearest to me — swung round to face their own. Only they weren’t their own anymore: they were in fact enemies.

It was actually quite impressive: a dozen burly guards who all looked practically identical — to all intents and purposes, they could have been brothers — all went for each other as if obeying an invisible command. Within the brief delay caused by the surprise effect, seven of our enemies lost their heads almost simultaneously, and two more were seriously wounded. What a shame I hadn’t had more space! The effect might have been even better.

Still, those of the Archali who’d kept their wits about them quickly grasped the change in the situation. The captain, too, thrust his arm forward, sending my “worshippers” flying toward the wall together with half a dozen of his own guards, including one of the wounded. They must all have been stunned because the remaining guards promptly hacked my supporters to pieces, sending clouds of feathers into the air.

That was one hell of a spell he’d just used. It must have cost him a lot of money.

Let’s sum it up, then. The pros: out of thirty guards, there were only four left standing, not counting the captain himself. The cons: I really didn’t like the way he was looking at me.

“Savior!” someone shouted.

I’d much rather have continued to travel incognito but the captain was already heading toward me. On his way, he brushed off a thief, breaking the poor guy’s neck. The expression in his eyes promised nothing good. He looked at me like a hungover alcoholic contemplating an ice-cold beer.

Trying to use the Shield of the Lamb was pointless: it wasn’t going to work against a creature of Light. I could activate the Righteous Blow, I suppose. Having said that, there was something else I could use...

Still, my ambitious plans weren’t meant to come to fruition because at that very moment, Traug rammed the captain like a tiny bull terrier rams a bear. He even managed to graze him, drawing blood.

I couldn’t believe my eyes. I doubted very much that the captain didn’t know any protection spells. What was that, then? A case of extreme overconfidence on his part? Still, judging by the way he switched from defense to attack, pushing Traug back, his confidence seemed quite justified. I cast Ice Flourish and chuckled my satisfaction, registering the damage. Still, the captain couldn’t have cared less. He must have had more hit points than I could possibly handle.

Talking about which. I raised both hands in a praying gesture, then spread them wide. My recently-gained Healing was just what we needed right now. Two hundred extra points can’t possibly hurt.

And judging by the way the fight was unfolding, we just might need them. When soldiers are pitched against the same number of common thieves, the outcome is pretty obvious. All my hopes now lay with Traug (who was still retreating under the captain’s onslaught) and in myself.

I didn't even have to pick my next attacker. One of the guards had just dispatched yet another thief and was making his way toward me.

He started by slashing at my chest which didn't really worry me that much. All he’d done, he’d removed one of the Mantles, while I just

somersaulted and jumped back to my feet. Still, he soon showed me that his “kung fu” was definitely better than mine. He was swift and very agile. I’d love to know what they fed them here!

I understood him. He couldn’t have had a better motivation than to kill a Player in possession of one of the Avatars. It was, however, a distinct possibility that the captain might dispense with him to lay his own hands on my Avatar, but that wasn’t my problem anymore.

In my dreams, I was already making short work of this avian squad. All that was left to do was to make the said dream a reality.

I cast another Ice Flourish, keeping in mind that it was the cheapest of my cool destruction spells. The Game promptly applauded my efforts:

Your Destruction skill has increased to level 12.

What was their problem, did they have a shortage of Veils here? I’d already relieved him of quite a bit of Health and continued to strip him of 5 pt. damage per second. Who did he think he was? I even started to get excited. Well dude, if you consider yourself immortal, I guess I’m gonna have to disappoint you.

He parried my next attack rather effortlessly. Ditto for the next one. You can say whatever you want, you can’t beat practice. Had I had the luxury of training for at least a year, I might have been able to defeat him without having to fall back on any tricks. Sorry, dude.

[∞]

My Katzbalger entered his side right between his ribs. It was really a lucky strike in that it hadn’t met with any resistance as if I’d just assaulted a shop mannequin, not a living breathing opponent.

Your Short Blades skill has increased to level 20.

You’ve achieved Mastery in the following skill: Short Blades.

Mastery level: 2

Every third blow in a combo will be able to pierce a suit of light or medium armor.

I twisted the sword in the wound with some sort of unhealthy fascination, watching him squirm. Much better. Let’s face it: I wasn’t much better than Talsian, the blood mage-turned-serial killer.

I pushed him aside, watching him croak, and was about to leave when a strange thing happened.

The Archalus started to glow, apparently from inside. Then he just sprang to his feet, perfectly whole without a single injury. Don’t get me wrong: I knew how healing spells worked, but this... this...

With an ill-boding smile, the guard went for me.

He was too fast. I stumbled over a rock and went sprawling over the cobblestones, watching his sword rise over my head.

[∞]

I managed to dodge the blow. Only now did I realize that I had no more time rewinds left.

I glanced over the battlefield — or should I say, the scene of the massacre. The captain had pinned Traug to the ground and was pummeling his helmet with his bare fists. Traug’s head kept hitting the pavement with the sound that reminded one of tapping a zinc bucket.

There were only two thieves left standing. One of them was Boss. They stood no chance against the two remaining guards. I was surprised that they were still on their feet.

Me, I was retreating from my opponent who kept steering me toward a dark corner, apparently intending to put an end to this stupid human.

I didn't have the slightest chance. The Archalus was faster and better trained. With a heavy sigh, I spread my arms toward him and activated the only thing I still had left in my arsenal: Righteous Fire.

His face began to transform like a sheet of paper consumed by a wisp of flame. His skin turned dark and crispy; his hair crackled and fell out; his feathers burst into flames. It happened so fast — much faster, I think, than last time, because his charred skeleton dropped to the ground before I could even recover from the shock. It fell onto the cobblestones and crumbled to dust.

You’ve killed a Player who was hostile to you.

A change in development branch available: Carrier. In order to activate it, you need to select it as your new development branch within the next 24 hours.

You’ve gained the Charisma skill.

You’ve gained the Repletion spell.

To add to it, my makeshift show entitled *The Burning of Trip Gas* had attracted the attention of the remaining guards — who were so busy gaping that Boss managed to whack one of them with the hilt of his backsword. In retaliation, the other surviving guard pierced Boss with his sword and went for the last thief.

My gaze met the captain’s. He flung Traug aside and stomped in my direction.

I hobbled toward him on feeble legs. I was almost out of mana and had none of my Avatar’s abilities left. The only thing I could count on against this bear of a man was my Katzbalger.

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Chapter 26

PEOPLE WHO DIE HEROES always do so for a higher cause. A house owner who confronts a bunch of burglars is protecting his family cowering in the garage. A cop caught in a shootout with hardened jailbirds is defending the peace and quiet of his fellow citizens. A firefighter choking on carbon monoxide is desperate to rescue a little girl. Me, I was dying for nothing. Honestly, I was dying of my own stupidity as usual — namely, because I'd meddled in big boys' games.

The first thing I did, I feigned a lunge in order to slash down at him. Still, the captain kicked me away as if I were a kitten. One Mantle and probably a couple of broken ribs down.

The captain approached me unhurriedly, apparently enjoying the moment. I slid a shaking hand into my inventory, pulling out the Potion of Starlit Sky. It took me two attempts to pull out the stopper with my teeth and down the vial's contents. Without trying to get up, I cast Electric Field. I knew it was a vain attempt and that the damage would be minimal, but it just might keep him at bay for a brief while.

And that was exactly what happened.

While he was struggling out of the spell's grip, I'd already climbed back to my feet and produced my crossbow. All I had left was one magic bolt and two regular ones. Not much at all. Still, I had no doubts about how I was going to use them.

I loosed them off nicely grouped. The last bolt did pierce him near the shoulder though and not the center of his torso like the first two. Still, compared to the size of his powerful chest it looked as if I was trying to do some acupuncture of him.

“You’re Savior, aren’t you?”

“A little, I suppose.”

I was hoping that he would now start talking, in the best tradition of action thrillers where villains always embark on a long and meaningless diatribe in the end, giving someone — like Traug, for one — the chance to stop kissing the paving stones and come to my aid. Alternatively, how about the one surviving thief who was now backing off from the captain... but no, we’d better keep the local gangsters out of the equation.

To be fair, there *was* no equation. Because the said villain (a.k.a. the captain who suited the role better than everybody else) didn’t say much else, probably hoping to soon become the latest proud owner of Savior’s avatar.

I reached for the last vial of the Starlit potion and downed that one, too. Then I took one last deep breath and activated Combat Telekinesis.

I wasn’t aiming at his chest. It would have been pointless, given his bulk. So I aimed at his leg.

Your Myaticism skill has increased to level 10.

You’ve achieved Mastery in the following skill: Mysticism.

Mastery level: 1

Improves the effects of Mysticism spells against all non-sentient creatures.

It worked a little better than just well, even if I say so myself.

The captain seemed to have slipped for no reason at all, as if he’d lost his balance for a second. He leaned forward as he fell and flapped his

wings, trying not to land on the pavement. I was already lunging at him and managed to slash his thigh with the Katzbalger.

My charmed sword was perfect against his ilk, all those guys in possession of Light karma. And it didn't fail me. The guy's skin parted upon impact like a pair of tight pants rips apart under the pressure from a well-fed backside. Blood gushed, revealing bright crimson flesh.

Still, the guards' captain didn't seem to care about something as petty as slashed wounds. He grabbed me by the neck and lifted me in the air. His body began to glow, just like the other guy's had before him.

I very nearly cried in despair. The wound on his leg was gone, and so were the bruises from the bolts in his chest even though the bolts themselves were still sticking out.

That wasn't fair!

The captain lifted me higher as if studying me. Then he squeezed my skull until my vision darkened. I wanted to tell him I was no freakin' watermelon but I seemed to have lost the ability to speak.

Just at that moment, when I was beginning to reach the point of no return, the captain screamed. His grip loosened.

I collapsed onto the ground, shaking my head and trying to put the fragments of reality back into a single picture. That must have taken me a couple or seconds. But once I had, I very nearly clapped my hands with joy.

Crier, the old dear, he *had* come to my rescue in the end!

His head was now peeking from behind the burly shoulders of the captain who was flapping his wings in an attempt to shrug him off, but the old thief managed to hold on tight. He even seemed to be hurting the captain. Still, I knew I had to hurry because the other bastard had already killed Boss' bodyguard and was hurrying to his commander's rescue.

Once again, it was a job for my Katzbalger. Now that the captain was busy spinning round, he'd become an attractive target. After a few precise blows, his arms were covered with deep slashes. But then he started glowing again! His wounds closed. Shit, this was beginning to drive me nuts!

With one sharp blow, the surviving guard unseated Crier from the captain's back. His commander turned toward me.

Oh. I'd been hoping for a different outcome.

The captain grinned. "So, where were we?"

"Take your hands off him."

All of us turned round: myself, the captain and even the guard who'd just grabbed Crier by the throat as if he knew about his development branch. Then again, Crier probably didn't have enough charges to activate his signature scream, anyway. Never mind.

Limping unhurriedly toward us in his crumpled helmet was Traug himself. With neither sword nor shield. Bruised by both life and his opponent, he looked admittedly downtrodden next to the burly captain. And you mustn't forget that Traug stood seven foot tall himself!

The Archalus leader had no intention of pussyfooting around this whippersnapper for too long. He just wanted to finish dealing with the main course in order to finally move on to the dessert. So he just walked quickly toward Traug.

Then a strange thing happened. At first, I got the impression that Traug had caught fire. Literally. Something that looked like smoke started billowing from under his armor, growing thicker and thicker with every passing second. I realized then that it must have been some kind of murky light green gas.

The captain chose not to stop. He walked right into the cloud and burst out coughing. I heard him hissing and choking; then he collapsed onto his back.

Traug deactivated his gas attack mode, straddled the captain and started pummeling his face with malicious force, fully intending to beat his nose into the back of his head. Basically, he was doing the same as the captain himself had tried to do only a few minutes earlier, the difference being that unlike the captain, Traug had a nice suit of armor on. His steely gauntlets worked as a pair of quality knuckledusters, so I wasn't even surprised to hear the sound of breaking bones.

And still, when Traug's fist hit the pavement right through the gory mash that had just been the captain's face, I hiccupped in surprise. It had all happened too quick.

Me, I was already on my feet, darting toward the sole surviving guard who was still lunging at Crier and had already managed to graze him a couple times. The old thief's amazing agility was the only thing that still kept him alive. What a shame he'd spent all of his charges back in the temple. Right now we could use his vocal ability.

I had no intention of wasting my time on chivalrous niceties. I just dashed toward them and slashed out at the base of the guard's wings.

Your Short Blades skill has increased to level 21.

Have you ever heard a hare screaming? Now imagine that cute little animal being torn apart after having his extremities ripped off — and you'll have some idea of how the Archalus sounded. Blood gushed; the furious avian tried to elbow me in the face.

Still, I wasn't too bad either, even if I say so myself. I ducked just in time to see his arm fly past me, allowing me to gently see him off with my

sword. Seeing yet another flash, I almost ground my teeth in despair as he was once again towering before me, as right as rain.

Still, he'd healed himself one second too early. Crier's knife pierced his neck, severing his spine.

The captain gave me a surprised look and collapsed onto the paving stones, crumbling to dust.

I heaved a sigh and surveyed the field of battle. The enemy's losses were five Archali in different states of disrepair against just one of our thieves who hadn't crumbled to dust which meant he was still alive. I wish I could say the same about Boss who'd only left a small neatly folded pile of personal belongings behind.

All in all, there was plenty of loot here, even though I wasn't really interested. What did attract my attention was a Player who suddenly peeled himself off the wall and did a runner. I recognized Beringil, Boss' son, who'd all this time been observing the fray.

"Traug, go get him!" I shouted because my own Vigor was approaching zero.

Still, Crier reacted faster than either of us. With a conjuror's gesture, he fished out a throwing knife from his inventory and threw it at the fleeing Archalus. Its blade pierced the traitor's outspread wings — because by the looks of it, this asshole intended to escape by air.

Beringil's screams were even more dreadful than those of the captain. He threw his arm behind, trying to reach his shoulder blade, and immediately received another throwing knife, this time below his knee cap.

The battle-weary Traug may have lost some of his speed but he was clearly faster than the wounded Archalus. Soon Boss' hapless son slumped on one knee before us, gently supported by Traug from behind.

“You killed your own father,” Crier said, his jaw muscles quivering.

“He was killed by his own poor judgment. And it’s gonna kill you too. As soon as the Daggerists find out...”

“You should have listened to Serge’s plan better,” Crier said. “We’re going to lay low while the Archali summoned by the commander from the capital mop this bunch up. Now that both the guards’ captain and his Archali are dead, there’s nobody left to cover their asses.”

You’ve taken the first step toward acquiring the Tactician ability.

“But someone will go looking for them!”

“Of course. In which case, their connection with the Daggerists will come to light. Many will think that the captain was so afraid of an investigation that he disappeared. I’ll make sure that our people sneak into his room and rearrange it a bit to make it look like he left in a hurry.”

“You don’t even know...”

“Yes, we do. The right wing of the Northern barracks, third floor, the first door from the staircase. Did you really think you could outsmart everyone?”

“Right, then. What are you going to do with me? Our Code of honor prohibits you from killing me.”

“Does it?” I said, surprised.

“According to the Code, a traitor should be brought for judgment. Only once the sentence has been pronounced...” Crier gave Beringil a long look. “But you’re right in one thing. Our Code is outdated. Which is why we’ll do it the easy way.”

He ran his blade across the traitor’s throat as you would cull a sheep.

Traug let go of him. Beringil fell, trying to close the wound. Blood poured over his hands; his eyes bulged in their sockets. He thrashed around, convulsing; I think he even shat himself. Not a dignified death; I wouldn't want it.

Crier just stood there covered in claret; I got the impression that he was quite satisfied to watch his ex-clan member die in agony. And once Beringil had turned to ashes, the bloodied spots disappeared from Crier's clothing.

"We need to clear off," he said.

"Traug, I want you to finish off the guards," I snapped.

You've gained the Leadership skill.

You've given orders to kill a Commoner who was neutral to you.

-100 karma points. Current level: +5580. You gravitate to the Light Side.

This message was the direct result of Traug's genociding the surviving Archali. In a blink of an eye, my Karma dropped to 5180. Had I known this, I'd have happily killed all the guards myself. By now, I'd almost overcome my natural squeamishness, and I could always use a few extra spells and skills. O shit of shits! Where was the time rewind when you most needed it!

"So much loot," Traug thundered happily.

"Don't shout," I hissed, still angry with my own overhasty decision. "Someone might hear us. I'm surprised that no one has peeped out the window until now."

“Don’t worry about it,” Crier laid his hand on my shoulder. “The houses to the left belong to the local funny farm. Its wards are too noisy to hear anything that happens outside. And the buildings in the right are all empty. They’ve rehoused their old inhabitants. That’s why Boss chose here as a meeting place, away from prying eyes. Oh, and there’s still something else, Serge...”

“Like what?”

“Your loot. You and your friend have killed a lot of Archali...”

“Oh please don’t drag it out! Your theatrical pauses are driving me nuts!”

“We can’t allow you to collect the guards’ uniforms and personal possessions.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because those who will come after you will recognize them and find out the truth. They’ll just lean on the vendor that you sell it to until he tells them the truth.”

“And what are you going to do with all that stuff?”

“We’ll just hide it. We’ll stash it away so well that nobody will ever find it.”

“But... it’s worth a lot...”

“Not as much as our own lives.”

“Oh well. Had it not been for the millions I’m about to make, I would have never agreed to it. Never mind. Have it your own way. Traug! I want you to gather everything together. Make sure that nothing is left here, then just give it all back to Crier. All except the dust.”

After about ten minutes, we hurried back down the sewer, supporting the unconscious thief who'd not yet come around. The street behind us looked exactly as we'd found it. The ashes had already dispersed, the blood disappeared, the feathers rotted away.

Admittedly, we'd been exceptionally lucky — because just as we'd left, a strange pair came past the funny farm, holding a tied-up Archalus. As we descended the steps, I could hear them hammering on the door of one of the houses. Crier had been right: the inhabitants of that strange institution were unlikely to have paid any attention to the chaos outside.

It was such a shame to give up all the swords, armor and personal effects which included lots of jewelry. Traug must have heaved a good twenty sighs, expressing his displeasure at my decision. Good job that Arts wasn't here. She would have drooled all over them. Still, we'd earned 640 grams of dust which we split between the four of us. It wasn't much but it would certainly cover our fare back.

We parted ways just outside the city walls. That was exactly where the sewer ended.

"You've done a great job, Serge. Now we've got a chance to get our old standing back."

"Yeah right, so you can continue stealing. I really don't know whether what I've just done is a good thing or bad."

"Time will tell. But we'll always be happy to see you."

You've just helped Mylleth's firm of thieves.

You've received a new title: Rogue Spy

Allows you to go unhindered in the places that are controlled by thieves who honor the Code.

“Listen Crier, these thieves who honor the Code — say, the thieves of Elysium and Firoll — can they come to some agreement between them? Or will their creeds be stronger than them?”

“The Code is beyond creeds. Even though I personally suspect it’s not perfect.”

“Relax, man. You can carry on living by the Code. I won’t tell anyone anything about this Beringil affair.”

We bid a warm farewell and set off on our return journey, traveling as fast as we could.

We really had to hurry because Mylleth seemed to have sprung to life, and I really didn’t like it. The sky above the city teemed with Archali. Even if the city’s officials hadn’t started mass purges yet, they would definitely have called a curfew. I just prayed that nothing would happen at the “customs”.

Thought must be material, after all. Because I’d jinxed it, hadn’t I? There was already an impressive queue waiting in front of the Gates — or rather, in front of the clumsy and somewhat ungainly Archalus who was still scribbling on his piece of paper. Fourteen Players, including ourselves, were in a hurry to leave Elysium.

We joined its far end. I strained my hearing, and after a few minutes I’d already gleaned quite a few interesting facts.

Apparently, something bad had happened in the city. Aarat Tkhel had been desecrated. As rumors had it, two Archali had committed the terrible crime. Both of them Illustrious. Which made sense, because no one else had access to the gardens of Elysium.

For that reason, all the Archali Players who approached the Gates were stopped and sent to a makeshift check station controlled by a few

guards. All the others had to wait but at least no one created problems for them. It just wasn't worth it, what with the potential loss of Reputation points and all.

As I waited in line, I checked out the windfall I'd received.

Leadership (Eloquence/Intellect). Allows you to positively influence any friendly sentient beings under your command.

Your current level of Intellect allows you to have positive influence on two sentient beings.

Your current level of Eloquence allows you to select either two development branches, or one development branch and an improvement to an existing one. Development branches available: Attack and Defense.

Unhesitantly, I poked Defense.

Improvements available:

— against Destruction magic

— against throwing weapons

— against firearms

— against technogenic weapons

Warning! Your choice will determine the exact percentage of your protection.

After some head-scratching, I still poked Magic.

All hostile damage against two of the sentient beings under your command has been reduced 15%. The choice of the sentients in question is

up to you.

Not bad. I glanced at Traug: something like an inactive force shield was hovering in the air above his head. As soon as I'd started wondering how to activate it, the shield lit up. I just loved this mental command thing. Congrats, bro, your protection had just upped a notch.

What about the spell, then?

Repletion. Allows you to heal any wounds regardless of their gravity, including the most difficult ones.

Use: on self

Cost: 500 pt. mana

This was the whole clue to the captain's minions' cheating. He probably wasn't averse to it, either. Still, 500 mana per activation was a bit too rich. At this cost, I could only activate it once. But the captain had cast it twice — and could do so a few more times, by the looks of it. That's why he hadn't bothered with Veils and Mantles. The more I learned about these worlds' tricks, the less I liked them.

Our turn was gradually getting near. Traug was visibly getting jumpy, so badly in fact that he'd very nearly put on his dented armor. Yeah right. That would have been a perfect excuse for them to arrest us. It was only thanks to my Eloquence (laced with a generous dose of threats pronounced in the friendliest manner possible) I managed to reason with him, thus avoiding a complete catastrophe.

Finally, a beastman who was the last in line before us made his way to the gates. It was our turn now.

"Traug, what kind of gas was that?" I asked.

“Just some asphyxiant,” he reluctantly admitted. “It’s the development branch I have. That’s what it’s actually called: Asphyxiant Gas.”

“And I thought it was—”

“A stinker,” Traug finished grimly. “That’s what they started calling me. So that’s why I had to leave Noggle.”

“Oh please man, that’s not what I was trying to say!”

“Then don’t. Don’t tell anyone.”

“Over here,” Eye Piece motioned us.

He gave us a weary look. He’d actually shifted his eyepiece onto his forehead in order to fill in the paperwork. I doubted he was paid extra for overtime, so he didn’t give a damn — or rather, he didn’t give an Angel’s feather — for any extra effort.

“A Korl and a half-blood human,” he finally located us in his logs and continued out loud, “’Visiting the most beautiful temple in the whole of Elysium’? That was quick!”

“To be honest, we never made it there,” I adlibbed. “We came across that brothel on our way, and your Angelic girls are out of this world, if you know what I mean. After a couple of hours, we’d spent every penny we had on us. So we decided to do a quick cash run. We’ll be back soon.”

“The brothel, which brothel?”

I broke out in a cold sweat. I was already reaching into my inventory for my Katzbalger, checking my restored mana numbers as I did so.

At which point, Traug butted in, “Holy Whores it’s called.”

“Oh yes, that’s an excellent establishment,” Eye Piece grinned. “And it’s not cheap, you’re dead right there. Very well. You can pass.”

Which we did. Almost. Because at the last moment, I felt queasy.

Bastard! I’d walked all through Mylleth’s sewage system without feeling a thing. Even the massacre of the guards had failed to make me sick. And here, it just came up out of nowhere. All because of Bumpkin’s antidote potion! I started throwing up right in front of Eye Piece who leapt aside in disgust so promptly that his eyepiece dropped from his forehead back onto his eye.

“Illustrious!” he wailed like a banshee.

Time to leg it. Traug promptly punched his lights out, just to make sure he didn’t trouble the esteemed Archali officials with any nonsense, while scooping me up with his other hand.

Even if we didn’t have wings, we literally flew the brief distance left to the Gatehouse. As we reached the entrance, somebody’s hands grabbed me and pulled me back inside where I finally came to.

Looking up, I saw Arts’ anxious face and Litius’ feline muzzle. His tail seemed to live a life of its own. Traug was facing the entrance, sword in hand, next to the Gatekeeper who’d deigned to step off his pedestal.

A bunch of saber-rattling Archali swarmed just outside the open door but dared not come in. Who did they think they were, vampires waiting for a special invitation?

Grunting, I scrambled back to my feet. “I’m okay. Thanks. I’m perfectly fine.”

Arts was the first to regain her cool. “Well done!” she said sarcastically. “Now we’ll be banned from this place for life!”

“Yeah right. It’s not as if you visit it every weekend, is it? I’m not too impressed, anyway. As worlds go, this one is pretty nondescript. The grass is a bit greener; there’s a bit more oxygen in its atmosphere, but overall...”

“Okay, okay, quit blabbering. Let’s go home. Excuse me, Sir,” she addressed the Gatekeeper unhappily, “We need to get to Purgator.”

The Keeper of Worlds didn’t reply. He walked back to his pedestal and stopped in front of the stone. My friends followed. They joined hands and turned to me,

“Are you coming?”

“Listen guys, I’m really sorry. I can’t go to Purgator.”

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Chapter 27

WE'RE TOO USED to casually reneging on our words. For us to promise something or swear upon something is the easiest thing in the world. We'll thump our chest reassuring everyone that "we'd never do such a thing", then just play it down pretending it never happened. We'll blame it on being drunk, say it was just a bad joke or even confront our friend with a comment like "you can't be serious!"

This age of information technologies has also introduced a number of changes to our mentality. Our online anonymity allows us to talk a bunch of crap: a weird shift in our minds which we don't necessarily notice. We start speaking in real life as if it were the Internet which has to a large part replaced our lives.

Still, the Game was a much harsher mistress. Here, you couldn't just speak off the top of your head. You couldn't swear by the Game only to take your words back at a later date. These kinds of empty proclamations were frowned upon — in fact, they were strictly punished.

It was a good job Litius realized it just in time.

"He *can* walk, can't he?" Traug asked. Of all of us, he was the most disenchanted with my whims.

"He can, only the further he gets away from Clinger, the worse he's gonna feel," Litius mused. "It's a bit like a drug addict doing cold turkey. Sergei did promise to give him the stone the moment he had it. So he's obliged to keep his word now."

"So where's the problem? We'll just go back to Noggle, give Clinger the stone, kill him and take the stone back."

Litius shook his head. “We c-c-can’t do th-th-that. Sergei also promised that none of us would ever harm him. So we won’t be able to do it, as simple as that. As far as I gather, this predicament will last for a while even after our deal is closed.”

Arts rolled her eyes. “So what was the point in risking our asses for this stone if we now have to give it up?”

“Whatever happens, we’ll get the money for it anyway,” Traug grinned, ever the optimist.

“Please don’t try to be even dumber than I think you are. A measly couple of kilos of dust is nothing for a stone like that!”

“Th-th-there I would ag-g-gree with Arts.”

“Litius, why are you stuttering again?” I asked.

“B-b-because your feathered friends m-m-make sure we don’t enjoy any p-p-peace and quiet.”

He had a point. The armed Archali were still hovering outside, speaking in low voices and glaring at us. One or two had sheathed their swords and entered the Gatehouse, although they didn't approach us. We kept a low profile too, for fear of saying something we might regret.

Arts pursed her lips. “Going home isn’t an option, either. We just don’t know when Sergei might have another fit. And what are we gonna do with him then?” she cast a suggestive look at me. Or maybe it was my imagination.

“It’s rather s-s-simple, really. All we need to do is find someone who we can tell about our agreement. We could bemoan the loss of the stone and hint at its importance to us. Not asking or ordering anyone directly — just *hinting*, if you know what I mean.”

“Litius, just how do you want us to do that? ‘Excuse me, Sir, we need to smoke some guy but we’d rather not soil our own hands.’ Winking meaningfully at him the whole time. Is that what you suggest?”

“We n-n-need someb-b-body we can tr-tr-trust.”

“Oh,” Traug said, raising his hand like a schoolboy. “I think I know just the man.”

“Please,” Arts quipped. “We’ve seen enough of your people. Your uncle was more than enough, thank you very much.”

“That’s exactly who I had in mind!”

“Wait a sec. The last time we saw him, he was in more than a hurry to get the hell out of Chou.”

“That’s just a ruse he always uses. He makes a big show of packing up and leaving. His creditors block all the roads and cordon off all stations and Gatehouses while he sits it out for a couple of months in a cheapo commoner hotel. He eats, drinks, and never goes out. Then he just shows up at the other end of the Empire and finds a new job. The problem is, there’re fewer and fewer places where he’s still unknown.”

“What a dysfunctional family,” Arts shook a disapproving head, then added after a pause, “And what about you? Would you like to see him?”

“Oh yes. I still have a bone to pick with him over a certain lady he sent us to.”

His eyes glinted with a promise that didn't bode well. That’s the kind of look you give to a cat who’s scratched and pissed over everything in the house when you take him down to be neutered. Never mind. What happens in a family stays in a family. On the other hand, I’d have loved to have seen two Korls scrapping.

“What about them?” I pointed at our feathered friends behind us.

“Once we’ve t-t-teleported, the Archali guards will undoubtedly try to drag us back. But there’re only about twenty of them. We can’t go to Firoll because Sergei is an Illustrious, and they know it. And neither Atrain, for reasons we all know.”

“What’s wrong with Atrain?” I snapped so loudly it attracted the attention of the Archali.

“Okay, so now we don’t need to bother to take Atrain off our list,” Litius said, watching the guards pay attention. “So: Purgator, Noggle, Mechilos and possibly also Atrain. Roughly speaking, it’s three times more Gates than they have guards. And even if they send somebody to Noggle, I doubt that any of the others would bother to search a one-horse town. They’re more likely to go for the capital and the frozen fortresses in the mountains.”

“But still, we should play it safe. And seeing as you’ve already given the game away,” I winked and added in a markedly loud voice, “seeing as the Daggerists have broken their agreement by not turning up, we need to go! We’ll come back later and give them the stone... don’t just stand there open-mouthed,” I added in a low voice. “Let’s split.”

The chilly winds of Noggle stroked my cheeks. I tugged my fur hat further down and breathed a sigh of relief. Something akin to light euphoria flooded over me, like the pleasure of the first morning cigarette over a cup of hot coffee.

“Feeling better?” Arts chuckled knowingly.

“Sort of,” I said, leaving the Gatehouse, then shuddered as the biting frost seeped into my bones. “Come on now, let’s go!”

“Get a move on!”

We passed the “customs” without a glitch. Seeing as Traug was with us again, we didn't have to pay any customs duties. I kept casting occasional wary glances at the Gatehouse but no one else came out.

Litius had a point: Chou definitely wasn’t the kind of place you’d want to escape to. Nothing to write home about; compared to the capital, the service industry was non-existent; good hotels were few and far between. In the meantime, Traug had asked the customs officers the addresses of five of the worst establishments of ill repute in town.

Your fame has increased to 10.

Your fame has increased to 11.

Your fame has increased to 12.

Your fame has increased to 13.

Your fame has increased to 14.

According to the Elysium corps of guards, you were involved in the theft of a holy relic.

You’ve received a new title: Archali’s Suspect.

If you attempt to show up again among the law-abiding citizens of Elysium, you will have to suffer the consequences. They will do their utmost to apprehend you and deliver you to the Central Temple for judgment.

You’ve framed the Daggerists thieves fraternity.

You’ve received a new title: Sworn Enemy.

If you attempt to show up again among this group, you will have to suffer the consequences. They will try to kill you.

You've diverted suspicion from the Mylleth firm of thieves.

You've received a new title: Capo. If you attempt to turn to them for help, no Code-abiding thief will dare refuse your plea.

In the end, of course, it was just a pile of losses. The Archali were mad at me; and so were the Daggerists. My Reputation had taken a nosedive; the only thing I'd achieved was the thieves had accepted me as one of their own. Time to book an appointment with a prison tattooist and learn some lingo from the slammer.

Still, there was one particular gain that outweighed all the losses, and it was now reposing in my inventory.

"Hey Sergei, whassup? What's with the paralysis?"

"Nothing It's just like our latest escapade made me into some kind of rock star."

"Come on, tell us all about it."

With a chuckle, I told them about the Game's generosity. Litius showed almost no interest; Traug frowned his disapproval, while Arts just cussed.

"This is really gonna complicate our movements."

I shrugged. "Sounds like it. The Daggerists won't hold out for long, anyway. As for the Archali, all they want to do is talk to us, not kill us. At least not straight away. And they just won't be able to escort me all the way up to the Central Temple. As far as I remember, Gatekeepers don't allow violence inside Gatehouses. So it's not so bad at the end of the day."

"You're not completely right there," Litius pointed out. "If you fall into the hands of the Archali, they'll know how to make you swear an oath

which will force you to follow them into Elysium. The same way as you've just arrived here against your own will. This is the kind of thing that happened to my brothers."

"Oh please," Traug said, taking my side. "What's the point in moaning about it before it even happens? It's not as if there're many Archali traveling between worlds! They only have one brain cell, and even that one is too busy scheming against the Kabirids."

"And if we take the Kabirids away, we'll get a spitting image of you," Arts remarked innocently, then hurried to add before the penny dropped, "Let's think about it later, okay? My lips are numb and even the snot in my nose has frozen. Where to now?"

"Come on," Traug waved us to follow him as he strode resolutely downtown.

Much to my surprise, we'd walked past a great number of buildings only to arrive at the exact one where we'd met Traug's uncle. I mean the tall building facing the frozen lake where said gentleman used to occupy an office on the third and highest floor.

Traug motioned us to wait outside and sneaked in.

It felt like an eternity, judging by the frozen state of my limbs. Finally, he reappeared.

"It's okay, just keep the noise down. Everyone seems to have left but you never know, there might be someone snooping around. I've spoken to the watchman."

The last time I was here, I noticed that the Imperial offices seemed to have a very weird structure. The first floor had a great many doors which seemed to indicate an equally large number of rooms. The remaining space was lined with benches where low-ranking clerks must have received their humble clientele. The overall design was depressing to say the least: flaking

walls, floors which sported well-worn paths, and brass door handles polished to perfection by the hands of hundreds of visiting hands.

The second floor was marginally more agreeable. Instead of benches, it had chairs with molded backs. Several portraits of uniformed dignitaries hung on the walls (Don't even ask me who they all were because I was never good at reading the Korl language). There were considerably fewer rooms here, too.

The third floor had no furniture where you could sit your backside down on — because these who'd made it all the way up here weren't supposed to wait. The walls were fashionably bare, with the exception of a few candle holders. The floor's only decoration was an enormous blind window separated into a great many little panes by an elaborate framework.

"They've only just stopped heating a couple of hours ago," Traug whispered, fiddling with the door to his uncle's former office. "That's why it's still relatively warm."

I grinned and pressed a warning finger to my lips, stopping Arts from voicing her indignation. Warm here it certainly wasn't; it actually reminded me of Russian apartments just the day before the council turns the central heating back on for the winter. I could sure use a fur coat and a pair of thick woolen socks. Still, admittedly the indoor temperature was considerably more comfortable than outside.

Traug's attempts to break in weren't very successful to say the least. At some point, he simply gave the door a good whack with his shoulder. The lock's tongue ripped out part of the door frame, but at least we got access to the room.

"You could have asked me," Litius said with a shrug, but nobody paid any attention to his words.

We walked in.

Nothing seemed to have changed here since last time, except there were fewer things there now. The room was much darker now, too. The darkness seeped inside through the thick glass, reaching into every corner. I had to cast Light again.

“Sergei, mind shining the light over here?” Traug asked, feeling around the fireplace. “Excellent. One problem less. We have enough firewood till morning. Arts, mind sharing one of the sparks that keep flickering between us?”

“I’d rather you freeze to death,” she replied through clenched teeth.

Still, she did conjure up a small fireball. Soon small tongues of flame were licking the firewood. Although it didn’t make the empty abandoned room any cozier, it did make it less intimidating. Litius made himself comfortable by the fire and reached his paws out to it.

“Great,” Traug said. “Now just stay here while I pop round to my uncle’s and get you some food.”

With that he left, moving as cautiously and noiselessly as his burly build allowed.

Litius added a couple of logs to the fire and curled up, all but purring. I sat next to him; Arts found a place at my side.

“It’s so cold,” she said, cuddling up to me.

“Sure. You’d better sit closer to the fire. Here, take this,” I removed my raincoat and draped it around the girl.

“Thanks,” she said unexpectedly grimly, lying down.

“This is a bit like scout camp,” I hugged my own shoulders, watching the fire. “It’s been ages since I looked at flames like this.”

“Please stop your mumbling,” the girl moaned. “I need to get some sleep. Look at the fish eater. He’s dead to the world already.”

She fell silent. The wood crackled away, gradually filling the room with warmth. Grotesque shadows danced in the flickering light. I got warm and comfortable leaning against the wall, so I hadn’t even noticed that I’d shut my eyes.

As I collapsed down yet another rabbit hole the size of an industrial mine shaft, I already realized that this was a dream. So I wasn’t at all surprised by the arrival of a new creature standing in front of me.

“You’ve come alone today,” I said. “Where’s your entourage?”

“They’ve got more important things to do,” the Chorul replied. “Just like you.”

“Really? Do I?”

“You’re doing everything right. You’re following in the path of a warrior. There’s only one last step left.”

“The stone, you mean. Am I right?”

The Chorul fell silent. He tilted his head ever so slightly. Although his face was still concealed by his hood, I could tell that he was studying me.

“You’ve grown more astute,” he said.

“That’s very kind of you. But you’d better just tell me what I’m supposed to do. You guys seem to travel into the future just like we pop out to the baker’s. So?”

The Chorul put on a fit of coughing to conceal his laughter. There was something weird about that. Very human, if you wish.

“Okay,” I said, “I can see you’re not going to tell me. I’m supposed to work it all out for myself.”

“Any word I might say could change the future. Which is something I just can’t afford. There’s too much at stake.”

“Like what?”

“You’ll find out in time.”

“Okay. If we can’t discuss the future, just tell me: why me?”

“You’ve got a very special force trapped within you which could radically change the very order of things. Alternatively, it could preserve the delicate balance. Your choice will decide the entire chain of events. You understand that, don’t you?”

“Not really.”

“Just like I said, it’ll all come in time. Carry on collecting the artifacts. And don’t forget about those who could help you sort things out.”

“My friends are always by my side.”

“I’m not talking about them. Sometimes those who are the closest hurt you the most. And other times they sacrifice everything they have for your cause. But it’s not them who will help you.”

“In that case, who are you talking about?”

“Players only have one kind of helper on their way.”

“Please. My head is about to burst. Why can’t you just say it? Why can’t you tell me more about the stones? What purpose do they serve? What do they have to offer?”

“There’s somebody who’s gonna tell you about this. Quite soon, too. A witness to somebody else’s murder which he’d caused.”

“And where do I look for the last stone? There was something about the mechanoids...”

“Sergei,” suddenly the Chorul appeared next to me. Literally in a split second. Just now he’d been standing over there — and now he was here right next to me with his hand on my shoulder. “It’s not as if you know many mechanoids. We never cross paths with anyone without a reason. Just remember that, Sergei... Sergei... Sergei!”

The Chorul kept repeating my name, shaking me by the shoulder. I was surprised to see that his hand was actually human, only slightly bigger than mine. I gulped and pulled the hood off his head.

Standing before me was Traug, anxious and disheveled. The darkness around the table began to take shape of familiar objects. I felt as if being spat back out.

“Sergei!”

“I’m here! What’s with all the shaking?”

“We were all so scared for you! When I came back, you were all dead to the world. At least Litius woke up as soon as he heard me. I managed to shake Arts awake. But you...”

“You were sleeping like the dead,” Arts nodded, looking scared. “You were all pale and cold. It was as if—”

“Don’t worry,” I said, getting up. “If I die, I’ll just disappear. What have you got there, Traug?”

The sheer abundance of food that Traug started pulling out of his backpack set us all drooling. Several kinds of salted meat, smoked sausages, some rock-hard cheese, flatbreads and — predictably — plenty of booze. In that, he'd surpassed himself, having fetched a full keg complete with mugs. I wouldn't exactly call it a tank but it must have been twenty pints at least.

Still, my friends' gazes kept worrying me. This was the sort of look one would give to a deadman who suddenly comes back to life at his own funeral. I did my best to ignore it and even drank a mug of ale or beer, whatever it was (the taste was nothing special). But after a while, I couldn't hold it any longer.

"What's all this about?"

"Are you feeling okay?" Arts asked cautiously.

"I'm fine. It's just that—" I paused, remembering that "*those who are the closest hurt you the most*". Still, I replied, "I've just been talking to the Chorul again."

"And?!" Arts leaned forward, all but knocking over the barrel.

So I had to tell them. How strange. Normally, you forget your dreams almost as soon as you wake up. But this time, I too remembered every word.

Having finished telling them, I suddenly got up because I'd just realized the most important thing. The others were so busy digesting what I'd just said that they didn't notice me getting up.

"What's up?" Traug asked.

"I've just realized I didn't ask him about the Horsemen at all. Not any of them."

Arts shrugged. “In that case, it’s probably not important. The whole of Cesspit is hunting them down now. I’m not even sure it’s your problem.”

“No, no, you see, it’s more than a gut feeling. It has nothing to do with my Intuition. I just know that our paths will cross.”

“Our paths will cross!” Traug said, mocking me. “You’re talking like a real Seeker!”

“It’s possible that you didn't ask,” Litius started pensively, “because you already knew what was going to happen.”

“Like what?” Arts asked, switching her gaze from Litius to myself.

“A battle,” I said. “Me, alone, against all of them.”

“Hey hey, how about us?” Traug said. “I thought we were friends. Because really, amongst Players, this sort of thing is, er, extremely... eeer....”

“Extremely rare,” Arts finished for him.

“Exactly!” Traug boomed.

“It’s not about that at all,” I said. “The battle can’t be avoided. That’s something that doesn’t worry me in the slightest. But there’s something that should happen before it even starts...”

“Now you’re talking even worse that your Chorul,” Arts said. “You should really go straight to the nearest newspaper and apply for a job as a crossword compiler. Traug, do you have newspapers here?”

“No. Only news leaflets.”

“Never mind. Let’s just eat,” I said conciliatorily. “I’ll take care of my anxiety issues. I might just take some ludes. Traug, you’d better tell us

how it went with your uncle.”

“Everything’s fine. You should have seen the slum I found him in. Still, it didn't take us long to come to an agreement. Just like you’d warned me, I was very careful with my words to make sure that I didn't break the promise.”

He spoke emotionally, waving his beer mug and making obscene jokes as he described his uncle’s prancing around the room after he’d been kicked where no man likes to be kicked. Litius hid a smirk in his whiskers; Arts openly laughed her head off. Me, on the contrary, I just smiled absent-mindedly, trying to suppress the growing feeling of foreboding.

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Chapter 28

AT FIRST GLANCE, the difference between the expressions “you only live once” and “you only have one life” is only very slight — but their meanings are radically opposed. The first expression suggests a reckless devil-may-care attitude and a “What the hell! Let’s go for it!” acceptance of any dare, however dubious. The second one, in contrast, makes one prudently think of their own future in order to spare oneself and stay out of trouble.

Today, as had happened often recently, I’d become a hostage of the first phrase. To agree to this escapade in Noggle where Players weren’t welcome at the best of times, put my trust in Traug’s uncle who wasn’t the most reliable business partner to begin with — and finally... Finally, to go as far as to actually kill someone for the most mundane of purposes: money. Somehow I didn't think my parents had raised me with this goal in mind.

Still, there was no doubt in my mind that such an act was warranted. I needed the stone, period. If I let Clinger go now, I’d never see it again. Besides, somehow I didn't think that that money-grabbing SOB had gotten the stone as part of his inheritance. Which was why any attempt to give me a sanctimonious lecture about the morality and legality of my actions would be slightly misplaced.

I have to say I was a bit edgy. When the door finally opened, letting in Clinger, I broke out in a cold sweat. He looked around squeamishly, winced at the sight of the very filthy tramp sleeping by the door, and nodded to the bartender. He inspected my friends huddled in the corner, then walked over to his table where I was already waiting for him.

“Your usual?” the bartender asked him without much enthusiasm.

“That’ll depend on what kind of answer my friend here has for me,” Clinger said. “Did you bring it?”

“Sure.”

For some reason or other, I slapped my pocket, knowing full well that the stone was in my inventory.

“I don’t want anything,” Clinger said to the bartender, sitting down at the table. “You know why I came here?”

“Because better places don’t let you in?”

“This is the safest place. Very soon it’ll be packed with Players. And to kill somebody in full view of Players would literally mean the end of one’s bartending career.”

“Unless you kill everybody in the room.”

“It would attract too much attention. That would be too much even for the most ruthless of scumbags, and you’re not like that. Okay, let’s go down to business. Where’s my stone?” he ran a shaking hand over his thinning hair. I had a funny feeling he was just as nervous as I was.

Gingerly I took out Certhall and laid it on the table. Just as my fingers released it, it flashed a blinding light, then regained its usual shimmer.

“What an interesting reaction,” Clinger said, sincerely surprised. “What kind of artifact-handling skills do you have? Or is it some special development branch?”

“Players don’t answer those kinds of questions,” I replied coldly.

“You never know, I might have a job for your specialty,” Clinger smiled, becoming even more smarmy than his name suggested.

“You don’t know my profile,” I replied calmly even though I was already starting to shake. “Let’s get back to discussing my payment.”

He hurriedly nodded, producing five heavy money bags which he placed in front of me.

Out of habit, I mechanically converted the amount into rubles, cussed mentally and licked my parched lips. It was a lot. A real lot.

Clinger, in his turn, put on a rough leather glove, carefully picked up the stone and brought it up to his eyes. He gave a happy nod to himself and secreted the precious item not into his inventory but into an inside pocket. He must have had dealings with thieves before.

“I hope you’re not thinking about doing anything stupid?” he asked.

“Relax. You’re not my type.”

“In that case, nobody’s gonna follow me, right? Because it would be pointless.”

With these words, he produced two glass vials, the kind that are normally used in chemical experiments, fitted with rubber stoppers and containing colorful liquids: one bright blue, the other golden.

“These are real rare. They take several years to prepare. This is armor potion,” he lifted the blue one. “It requires some Eye of Storm Wart. It blossoms only once in eight Terran years. Then, after all the ingredients are added, it has to age for another two years. And it expires after a year and a half. After that, it becomes useless. But even so, it costs an arm and a leg...”

“So much?” I asked.

Clinger nodded. “A heck of a lot. And even then, you can’t just walk into a shop and buy it. You have to go on a waiting list.”

“Yeah right, a bit like buying an iPhone, is that it?”

“Yeah, sort of, but with fewer imbeciles waiting in the queue. And don’t even start me off on this other one. It’s called Bewitch. A very special potion, this is.”

“Do I understand it correctly that it offers protection from both physical and magic damage?”

“Yes. The Armor potion lasts a minute, the Bewitch a minute and a half. Plenty of time to jump into the saddle and get the hell outta here. That’s just me giving you fair warning.”

I smiled and shrugged, as if I didn’t understand what the hell he was on about, and turned my attention to the dust.

The bags were heavy and pleasant to touch, permeating the air with the faint aroma of cinnamon. I felt like opening up one of them and taking a deep breath, feeling the spicy fragrance cling to my lungs. Ten kilos! Ten freakin’ kilos, man!

I startled, remembering Hunter’s warning about “dust junkies”, and hurried to put the dust into my inventory.

Clinger seemed to have been watching me attentively and somewhat disapprovingly. “If you’re into sniffing or, God forbid, jacking it up, it’s none of my business. Just let me give you a word of advice: it’s not worth a shit. I’ve seen many Players indulge in it, and all of them ended badly. So it’s better not to get into it in the first place. Oh well,” he rose to his feet, “the deal is done and both parties can now part ways,” he proffered his hand to me.

I shook it, then surreptitiously wiped my hand. Clinger lived up to his name: his fingers were sticky as if he’d just pulled his hands out of a packet of marshmallows.

Clinger downed the golden vial, followed by the blue one. He shuddered; his arms broke out in goosebumps. His skin darkened like a bitten apple that had been set aside and forgotten on the kitchen table.

He bowed with a mocking flourish and hurried away. He must have indeed left some kind of mount next to the entrance. The moment he jumped onto the animal's back and galloped off, the stone would be lost forever, together with Clinger himself who would go to ground. Of this I was convinced.

Still, Clinger never made it to the door. The tramp sleeping by the door jumped deftly to his feet. A sword's blade flashed in his hand.

The air rang with the clangor of steel. The fourth sword in the Empire, a.k.a. Vreig, Traug's uncle, stared at his opponent in disbelief.

No wonder: Vreig had just dealt Clinger a shattering blow. This was the kind of strike that swordsmen of old would use to smite their enemy from shoulder to hip. And all Clinger did was leap aside, switching his angry glare between the tramp and the door that his massive bulk was barring.

"Hey, innkeeper, go get the Warings!" Clinger almost shrieked. "Did you see that? He attacked me first."

"I didn't see nothin'," the bartender turned away and reached under the bar.

Clinger all but choked in fury. "Oh you didn't, did you? And you?" he asked, turning to my friends.

Litius lowered his head. Arts bit her lip. Traug snortled.

At this point, Clinger must have understood. "You!" he pointed his finger at me. "You!"

“Sorry, I don’t understand,” I said. “We’ve just closed the deal to our mutual satisfaction. You need to hurry now, don’t you, before your Armor potion has expired? What was it called again?”

Vreig must have put two and two together because he gave me a grateful nod. Clinger, however, gritted his teeth in impotent anger.

How I understood him. He was standing there: a vendor against a warrior, a big talker against a professional soldier. He always used to have someone to pull his chestnuts out of the fire for him. And it had always worked — until now. Because today, he’d finally met his match.

“You filth!” he screamed. “Scum of the earth! Help! Somebody help me!”

“It’s been proven that it’s more effective to shout ‘Fire!’ instead of ‘Help!’,” I offered. “Apparently, it creates a much bigger response.”

“Screw you!” Clinger replied. He pulled out some strange-looking piece of tube and pointed it at Vreig.

A jet of flame shot out toward Traug’s uncle. Clinger must have known how to use it because the fourth sword of the Empire screamed in an almost inhuman voice. I stared at the expiring sparks of his Veil, unable to grasp what was going on.

Enveloped in flames, Vreig dashed aside, trying to escape the line of fire while casting a spell which extinguished the flames consuming him. And just as Clinger started turning toward him, his toy expired. I shook my head in disbelief. A powerful weapon indeed!

It probably just needed reloading but Clinger didn’t get the time to do that: Vreig was already upon him, grabbing his arm and smashing it on the floor a few times. Even though you couldn’t deal Clinger any damage, that didn’t apply to his reflexes.

His fingers unclenched, sending the artifact flying a good twenty feet in my direction. While those two were busy grappling with each other on the floor, I inconspicuously picked up the elongated copper pipe with a tiny button on its side.

Raging Throat of a Dragon

When activated, belches a jet of dragon fire to a distance of up to 50 feet.

Duration: 4 seconds

Reloading time: 6 sec

Additional effects: destroys 3 enemy Veils per sec

Charges left: 6

Made by Master Granolod from the world of Chroman.

I wouldn't say I got all "Preciousssss" about it, Gollum-like, but I was dangerously close to it. Within the duration of 4 seconds, with 3 Veils removed per second, you could strip your enemy of 12 protection spells in one clean shot — or what the hell do you call the process of firing it? A nifty little thing.

In one quick confident motion, I slid the tube down my inventory and continued watching the unfolding combat.

Which was all but finished by now. A singed Vreig was sitting astride his opponent pinning his arms down and waiting. From time to time, he'd cast a heal on himself while studying Clinger's skin.

"You filth," Clinger sobbed, realizing he was finished. "Scumbags! All of you!"

“Come on, man up,” Vreig said, trying to calm him down. “A bit of dignity, dude.”

“Screw you! Screw all of you! Bastards!”

He fell silent, looking fearfully at Vreig sitting on him. The fourth sword of the Empire smiled in reply and reached for his blade.

I forced myself to keep looking. This had been my choice. He was dying because of me.

Vreig unhurriedly ran the tip of the sword along Clinger’s arm. When a thin trickle of blood ran to the floor, he gave a satisfied nod. Then he buried the blade in Clinger’s chest, putting his whole weight behind it.

Clinger grabbed at the sword, cutting his fingers. A strange mask of grief froze on his face. After a few more seconds, his body crumbled to dust.

“What a douchebag,” Vreig said. He gave himself a heal, then began rummaging through the remains, picking up various items. He was within his rights: this was his lawful loot.

“And where’s the pipe?” he demanded. “The one he, er, used against me? I could have sworn it was here!”

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said, standing up. “I don’t think I saw anything of the kind.”

“But it was—”

“There was nothing there.”

Our heavy glares met. I didn't have to be a shrink to know he didn’t like me. It happens quite often. Just body chemistry, you know: sometimes

you can meet someone, exchange a few words and you know straight away they're your kind of person. And sometimes the exact opposite is true. Like when you sit facing someone who's done absolutely nothing to annoy you but still they're just driving you up the wall, just by their presence. And this was one such case.

So now I was quite prepared to lock horns with him because the prize was just too good. Why not? My time rewinds were back; I had plenty of mana, my knife was on my shoulder and my Katzbalger within reach. All I needed was an excuse.

Still, the stars must have been on my side today — or maybe Vreig had finally realized that being the fourth sword in the Empire wasn't such a cool thing after all.

Your Persuasion skill has increased to level 23.

You've reached level 13.

"It must have been my imagination," Vreig lowered his eyes, pulling his glove on. "But this little stone," he gingerly picked up Certhall and placed it on the floor next to him, "I really don't need it. Anyone who wants it can take it."

"Vreig, I just wanted to say that you don't owe us anything anymore," I said. "Today, I decided to forgive all your debts. Just like that."

"Oh great," he chuckled. "In that case, I won't delay you any further. And if somebody would be so kind as to gift my friend Brubo the bartender five kilos of dust, also 'just like that', he would kindly forget all that has taken place here."

With those words, he darted out the door.

Traug was about to dash after him but I motioned him to stay. Even considering I'd just paid five kilos of dust for the mini flamethrower, we

were still well in profit. Basically, we were raking it in. So ignoring Vreig's request wasn't really an option. Brubo the bartender seemed to be quite an important man here.

I picked up Certhall, its imprisoned force tangible in my hand, and walked over to the guy. "Five kilos of dust. For you. Just like that."

My every word dropped like a chunk of lead but Brubo didn't notice anything. Or at least pretended he didn't. He put the money away, all businesslike, and added with a small bow,

"Thank you for your generosity. What a strange happenstance, don't you think, sir? Two Players, fighting, and over what? Having said that, it's none of my business. And to tell you the truth, the gentleman who was killed wasn't exactly popular. Everybody was fed up with him. He'd come and just sit at the table without ordering much. With customers like those, you can't make any money."

"As it's turned out, you can always make money, even with a penniless client."

"You sure can," Brubo chuckled, looking pleased. "Provided you try hard and know all the right people."

I walked over to my friends. Litius looked slightly lost, scared even. Arts and Traug beamed like cats who'd gotten the cream.

"It was really awesome," the girl said.

"Now that you're the stone's rightful owner, you can join it to the other two," Litius added.

I nodded. "Actually, yes."

I pulled out Arthall and Karthall.

Or rather, the single lump that they'd turned into. When the hell had that happened? Now both stones resembled a chunk of solidified lava. Their glow was all but gone. Still, I could sense that their united power was much stronger than that of the freshly-acquired Certhall.

Well guys, time for you to meet your new buddy.

The explosion roared exactly where I was standing. The only difference was, it didn't throw me aside although you'd think that in this situation, nothing really depended on yours truly. I was only a conductor between two electric charges, even if of a slightly unusual nature.

Once the blinding light had faded away, I found myself standing next to the two stones which were sparking, flashing and discharging electric arcs, desperately being attracted to each other. All of a sudden I became incredibly cold as if standing alone naked in an icy desert. All I could hear was a barely audible rustle of voices carried on the wind.

I startled, and it was all gone. The same bar; my friends were still the same too, except they were cowering in weird positions on the floor. The planks lining the walls were arching, trying to reach out for me. The tables and chairs were swirling around me in the air.

I forced the rocks together and hurried to put them away into my inventory.

The furniture clattered to the floor. A very indignant Brubo came running up to us. "Who's gonna pay for all this? Who, I ask?"

"From what I heard, you received quite a bit of dust from someone recently. I don't think you'll have problems redecorating."

I helped Arts to her feet; Traug and Litius got up on their own.

"We'd better get out of here," Traug whispered.

“I think so too,” I replied, then added in a louder voice, “Bye, Brubo.”

The bartender mumbled something to the effect that we weren’t welcome here anymore.

I didn’t bother to tell him that I wasn’t planning on coming back, anyway. I had no nostalgia whatsoever for my supposed birthplace, and traveling to Noggle for pleasure was a contradiction in terms. So we just slipped outside.

“We’re sorry, the premises are closed for a special booking,” the bouncer’s voice boomed as he turned away yet another patron who swung round and ran off cussing.

We slid past him and all but ran back to the Gates.

“Why were you lying there like that?” I asked.

“What else did you want us to do? Look,” Traug showed me his left hand, its fingers swollen and darkened. “This is what happened when I touched you. You should have heard the bang! I almost shat myself.”

“And we were thrown to the floor,” Arts added.

“Does that mean that when the rocks join, I become sort of invulnerable?”

“Not enough d-d-data to arrive at such a c-c-conclusion. One thing I c-c-can say for sure is that you’d b-b-better be left alone at such moments.”

“Never mind. We’ll sort it all out later. Here’s your cut,” I shared Clinger’s remaining money between them.

“I like it,” Traug boomed. “We got the dust and ripped off the customer. Hey Sergei, why the long face? Everything went — what did you

call it again, Arts?”

“Far out.”

“Exactly! Far out. You’ve got the rock and the money. Whassup? You keep thinking about those Horsemen?”

“There’s something much worse than the Horsemen,” I replied, walking over to the ‘customs officer’. “We’ve been galloping between worlds for two days already. Which means I was incommunicado for two days. And I have a funny feeling that I’m looking at one tough dressing-down the moment I’m back.”

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Chapter 29

THERE'S ONLY ONE THING worse than your partner's fury, and that's their indifference. Take it from me: if your arrival home from yet another unscheduled party isn't met with a generous dose of rebuke and ass-kicking, then things are getting really bad. Because at this point not only love, but even mere interest in your hapless self must have gone out the window.

Which was why, when I discovered eight missed calls from Mom and only two from Julia, something snapped inside me. Even the most patient of creatures have their personal boiling point. And I got the distinct feeling that Julia must have reached hers, predictably and unavoidably.

So I said a quick goodbye to my friends, changed up some dust for rubles, slipped out of the Community and dialed Julia. The call went through, then promptly stopped, engaged. Or to be perfectly honest, she hung me up.

I didn't have to call Mom because she dialed me first. She must have received a text telling her that the number was back online and ready for some quality chastisement.

"Sergei, what's up with your phone?"

"The battery was down," I blurted, then added, "And I left it at home."

"So which was it: you left it at home or was the battery down?"

"Both. I left it at home where it discharged."

"All right, it's not really that important. I heard you got yourself a girlfriend?"

That Lily! What a motormouth! Then again, it wasn't really her fault because my mother would have made any police interrogator proud.

"Why, is having a girlfriend against the law?"

"What a lot of garbage you're talking! I've already started marinating some ribs..."

Although the Game didn't issue me the Danger warning, alarm bells were already going off in my head, my brain cells rushing around in fireproof suits, preparing for an emergency. This switch in my Mom's logic from the state of my personal affairs to marinated meat clearly had some purpose. I had a funny feeling that this proverbial pound of flesh might become a pivotal point in my future.

"I could throw a salad together and we could have a family get-together tomorrow, all of us. Do bring the girl. What was her name again, I forgot?"

"You can't forget something you were never told," I said tensely.

"Oh please don't start. I'm simply interested in how my son lives."

"Drugs, sex and rock'n'roll. As usual."

"Sergei!"

Oh Mom. If you only knew what I was going through, you'd have turned gray prematurely. But that was irrelevant: if Mrs. Demidov sank her teeth into someone, she wouldn't let them go until she was satisfied. The woman had the grip of a bull terrier. Which unfortunately she hadn't handed down to me. So sooner or later I'd have to do her bidding.

Actually, this was a pretty good way of making up with my girl. Trumping her ten of hearts with my ace, so to say.

“Her name is Julia. All right, I’ll bring her round tomorrow. But please don’t overdo it. I have no intention of getting married in the immediate future.”

“Why would I do a thing like that? You’re too young still and besides, it’s your business,” she said, sounding like someone reaching for the family jewels that had been handed down by her grandmother. “We’ll be waiting for you,” she hung up.

Oh well. Or should I say, oh shit. The sheer complexity of my existence as a Player had finally started to dawn on me. Compared to it, even the potential hassle of an engagement didn’t scare me anymore. Going round to meet mom and dad, so what. The worst had already happened. Julia’s old folks seemed to have taken a shine to me. And considering that in my parents’ eyes I’d never had a normal permanent girlfriend, I doubted very much they’d be too picky. As long as she was alive, not a junkie nor an alcoholic, she had to be good enough.

There was something else worrying me. I was having an increasingly hard time trying to juggle my two lives: that of a regular person and a Player. And I wasn’t prepared to make any compromises. My first life had my family and Julia while my other one had my friends and the mysterious Choruls who’d made a bet on a regular half-blood Korl. And I was beginning to understand that untangling this mess while remaining the old Sergei Demidov in everybody’s eyes was becoming increasingly more difficult with every passing day.

I heaved a sigh. For the first time in all these weeks, I really fancied a smoke. I called a cab and started working on a plan of action.

Firstly, I had to do some shopping before Bumpkin went on strike. Secondly, I had to make up with Julia using whatever means I had available, including the in-Game ones. Thirdly, I needed to find out if there was any new information about the Horsemen. Which probably involved a visit to the Seers.

I zoned out for a brief while. What was more important now: the Horsemen or my private life which seemed to be going under at the speed of a mud slide?

I checked the world news for the last few days, then switched over to regional reports. Everything seemed to be quiet. Would Cesspit hold its ground until evening without my intervention? Hunter, where were you when you were needed the most?

On the off chance, I dialed his number. I listened to the dialing tone for a while, and then — oh wonder of wonders! — he picked up the phone.

“Hi,” I said, feeling like a kid caught making prank calls.

“Hi Sergei. Where are you?”

“I’m here, right next to the Community.”

I got the impression that Hunter covered the phone with his hand, said something to somebody standing next to him, then came back. “Great. I was afraid you wouldn’t be back before it all kicked off.”

“What did? The Apocalypse?” I asked, even though I already knew what he must have meant.

“Drop by at the Grand Master’s when you have a moment. Their residence is now at—”

“I know where it is. I was there already.”

“Super. That’s it. See you soon, then. Bye.”

I hung up.

I was of two minds whether to dash over to the Grand Master's but then I had a sudden pang of something unpleasant within me. Like, the time wasn't right yet. And I'd already learned to trust my Intuition by now. So Instead, I dove onto the back seat of the cab that had just arrived and buried my nose not in my phone but in my stats.

Available points: 3

Strength: 29 (x)

Intellect: 23 (x3)

Fortitude: 26

Agility: 33 (x2)

Stamina: 22 (x)

Rhetoric: 29 (x2)

Speed: 19 (x)

Not much. The problem was, I'd spread my skills too thin. At the same time, I'd managed to level up Mysticism, Shooting and Persuasion Skills really well. But the rest was pretty average. It was a good job I'd managed to up Intellect. This was very good news. Which meant I really should follow the Game's suggestions and select Intellect, Eloquence and Agility.

That should bring my own mana up to 60 pt. Now I didn't need any crutches like my raincoat or my fur hat to cast some minor magic. Nothing too special or powerful... wait a sec! It didn't seem to sum up, did it?

I took another closer look at my stats. Either my math skills were inadequate or for some other reason, but...

Mana: 160+550 (bonus from clothes).

I peeled off my fur hat. Immediately the “bonus from clothes” dropped to 500 — but the 160 didn’t go anywhere. I needed to sort it out.

I started scrolling through the avalanche of system messages until I found the most important one.

You’ve reached the first of the four bonus sublevels of Intellect.

+100 pt. to mana.

Aha, so that’s what it was about. Never mind. I was fine with that. They could have made it 200 pt. I wasn’t a proud person; I had nothing against accepting gifts provided I didn’t have to work them off later.

I went back to the messages.

You’ve reached the first of the four bonus sublevels of Intellect.

Your leveling up rate in Alchemy has increased.

Your current level of Intellect allows you to select one of the following applications of the Observation Skill: to non-sentient beings, natural or artificial objects.

Your current level of Intellect allows you to select one of the following applications of the Map Making skill: the modeling of an object from existing initial parameters; the drawing of maps on parchment.

Your current level of Intellect allows you to exert additional influence on friendly sentient beings under your command. Current number of beings: 3.

Your current level of Intellect allows you to use your Insight ability in order to single-handedly extract the following information about your

opponent: their skill; their most important ability; their Reputation; their karma.

Your current level of Intellect allows you to learn any language within the limits of your Linguistics skill. You can select from the languages of the following races: Korls, Archali, Kabirids, Abbas, Iorolfins and Purgs.

Your current level of Intellect allows you to select one of the following applications of the Sharp Eye skill: to non-sentient beings or natural objects.

Without thinking too much about it, I selected the bar of “Natural Objects” in both Sharp Eye and Observation Skills, “The Drawing of Maps on Parchment” in Map Making and “the Opponent’s Skill” under Insight. The only thing I didn't touch for the moment was Linguistics — because I really didn't know which language was better to choose. I might have dwelled a little longer on it but I was rather unceremoniously jerked back to reality.

“We’ve arrived,” the cabbie was saying, shaking my arm. “What have you been smoking, man?”

“How much?”

The cabbie showed me his tablet screen with the fare due. I gave him a note of a thousand rubles and kept all of the change up to the last dime. Calling your passenger a junkie doesn’t merit a tip.

I climbed out of the cab and heaved a sigh, staring at the little red bird on the supermarket logo. How I hated doing my weekly shopping! Life had been so much easier before. I’d buy a few precooked meals, boil up some pasta and live the life of Riley. Unfortunately, I couldn’t get away with it anymore. If Bumpkin had relegated Julia’s mom’s salads to the trash can, he’d surely bury any junk food delicacies in a radioactive waste disposal zone.

After another hour or so, having packed my inventory with four shopping bags of foodstuffs and seriously wondering whether it would all fit into my fridge, I finally arrived home.

As I looked out the cab window, I glimpsed Professor sitting on his bench. I smiled. He wasn't his usual cheerful tipsy self this time; on the contrary, he was as sober as a judge, staring gravely at the open newspaper in his hands.

"How are you, Sir?"

"Oh hi, Sergei," he sprang from the bench and started shaking my hand, looking sincerely pleased. "I'm so happy to see you!"

"What are you doing?"

"I'm looking for a job! My woman is busy cleaning, so I decided to get a breath of fresh air not to be in her way."

"A job?" I asked, surprised.

"You know, Sergei, our last conversation made me rethink a lot of things. It's like I suddenly saw the light. It's very difficult for a hardened materialist like myself to say this, but it was as if someone addressed me from above, saying, 'Alexander, get your life in order!' There must be somebody up there, after all. I was shaking like I never shook before, even when I was hungover."

I put on a bout of coughing to suppress a smile. Somebody up there, yeah right.

In the meantime, Professor carried on. "Already at the police station I decided to turn my life around. Do you remember what Daniel Defoe once said? *'It is never too late to be wise'*. The police captain who arrested me was the nicest person imaginable. He let me go after only twenty-four

hours. He was a bit funny though. He kept watching some kind of cartoons on his telephone. Japanese, I think. But nobody's perfect, don't you think?"

Our conversation was interrupted by his wife who leaned out of the window. What was it with me and people's names? Once again I couldn't for the life of me remember hers.

"Sweetheart, would you please take the trash out? Oh hi Sergei... how are you?" she added with a new note of politeness.

Oh great. This was all I needed. If it got around that Sergei D. could turn alcoholics round and put them on the path of sobriety, they would be queueing on my doorstep forever. Bumpkin wouldn't be amused.

"Hi," I nodded. "Well, Sir, good luck with your new life."

I dove past him into the entrance hall. Should I really go on a tour of our neighborhood, healing down-and-outs and relieving them of their addictions? Then again, it was probably a rather mediocre idea. In order to return into society's embrace, said society needs to be ready to embrace you. You need someone to help you make the first tentative step. And the second one as well, maybe. Professor had his wife — which was probably why he'd have never become a traveling philosopher preaching universal good and the abolition of violence. But what about all the others? I wasn't prepared to shoulder such a burden nor did I have the desire to do so.

How strange. In order to bring evil into this world, you need determination. But in order to bring good, what you need is a sense of responsibility.

Pensive, I entered my apartment.

I immediately knew that something was missing. Or should I say someone — Bumpkin, to be precise. I looked in every nook and cranny — which admittedly couldn't be that many in a studio apartment — checking them all several times. I rummaged through the ceiling closet, looked under

the bathtub and even felt in the narrow space next to the garbage bin under the kitchen sink — but my dear house goblin was nowhere to be found.

The fridge was almost empty; a still-warm trayful of pork was sitting in the oven. Which meant he couldn’t have left that long ago. How interesting.

I unloaded the shopping, had a wash and a bite to eat, then changed into some clean underwear. Although I’d have loved to have had a lie-down, I was obliged to go out again in order to embark on the most difficult and unpleasant task.

It didn't take me long to get to Julia’s. At this hour when the lunch break hadn’t yet started, the roads were relatively free from traffic. The sidewalks were deserted if you disregarded a couple of individuals of indeterminate age hugging king-size beer bottles in the children’s play area. Guys like them didn’t give a damn about either time or weather. Once they’d had their morning dose of fire water, they were free to do whatever they wanted and let their secretary handle any calls from the President.

With a chuckle, I walked over to the apartment buzzer and dialed the familiar number.

“Who’s that?”

“Hi Auntie Vera, it’s Sergei. Is Julie in?“

„Oh what a shame, she’s just gone out to take her thesis to her supervisor. You’d better come up, she won’t be long. Why aren’t you at work? Why don’t you just call her, she’s got her cell on her.”

“Mine’s gone flat, I’m afraid, so I just thought I might pop in as was going this way anyway. Never mind. I’ll catch up with her some other time.”

Your Lying skill has increased to level 16.

“If you wish. Just pop over whenever you can. I might cook something if you give me enough notice.”

“Will do. Thanks. Bye.”

Naturally, I had no intention of going anywhere. Instead, I beelined for an iced-over bench powdered with snow. Old Sergei might have got himself a beer just to while away the time, in which case he wouldn’t have differed that much from the two drunks hugging their industrial-size bottles. But now I absolutely couldn’t do it. To apologize to a girl while reeking of booze isn’t the wisest pick-up move.

Having said that, the old me would have probably just given up on the whole thing. Striving to attain my goals had never been my forte. I was infinitely better at running from problems, thank you very much. Strange how one can change, isn’t it?

Compared to the bitter temperatures of Noggle, the mild winter of the Russian south felt almost like the height of a Siberian summer — and still, I’d nearly frozen my backside off while waiting. I needed to find someone specializing in in-Game thermal gear. There must have been someone making it. If not, I’d have to make do with some kind of Grandfather’s long johns just to protect my invaluables. Which probably explains why I greeted the lone figure of the love of my life with a mixture of anxiety laced with a dose of relief.

“Julia! Jul!”

She looked at me, frowned, lowered her head and hastened her step, heading for the door. Judging by her speed and determination, she might have disappeared before I caught up with her.

But she didn’t know who she was dealing with. The Incremental Apparition did its work, especially because I’d stood there only very

recently, so my fifty-feet jump to the front door worked like a dream. Harry Potter, eat your heart out. I was getting better at it.

Your Mysticism skill has increased to level 11.

Julia all but rammed into me. She looked up, surprised, switched her gaze to the place where I'd just stood, but didn't say a word. That's how our little grudges are stronger than logical perception and even plain curiosity.

"Can you talk to me normally?" I said.

"What do you want to talk about? I phone you and you're out of range; I come to see you and your apartment is empty. Just don't give me this BS about your work again!"

"But that's exactly what it was! We got stuck in our regional branch. My cell was flat. Just business as usual. What's the point in making a mountain out of a molehill?"

"Well, maybe for you it's business as usual but—"

Uh oh. This was serious. I had to activate my super argument for commoners, courtesy of Eloquence.

"Yes, I know, it's my fault. Next time, I'll take a spare power bank with me. It was just that there were circumstances beyond my control. It just happened, you see..."

"I see. But I also see that I don't quite fit into your lifestyle. It's as if I constantly keep distracting you from something very important. I seem to be constantly in the way."

Shit! Even my secret weapon wasn't helping! She must have kept it pent up for a long time. Should I try and change the way I live my life, maybe?

The question was, what would I be swapping it for? For the tried and tested patriarchal model where the man is the breadwinner and the woman is the homemaker? And what if I hated it and it only got worse? And that was only half the problem. Starting a relationship with manipulation is a doubtful solution. So I decided to try to explain it to her like an ordinary man would have.

“You’re not in the way at all. I need you, it’s a fact. Otherwise why would I have taken you to meet my folks?”

“Meaning?”

“You heard it. Tomorrow six p.m. you’ll have the questionable pleasure of meeting the Demidov clan. Bring silver bullets, garlic and enough aspen stakes to go around.”

“Silver bullets only work on shapeshifters,” Julia grumbled, still angry, turning crimson for some reason.

“They’ll always come in handy. So would you forgive the idiot?”

She gave me a hug by way of answer.

Big sigh of relief.

“You going back to work now?” she asked.

“Not really. I have a couple of days in lieu. I might need to pop out to the office tomorrow, but that’s it.”

“In that case, how about I go up, change into something different and we go to your place together?”

“Sounds good,” I gave her a kiss.

“I won’t be long,” she disappeared behind the door.

My plan seemed to have worked, hadn’t it? All I’d had to do was show the seriousness of my intentions, offer some security and reassure her of my commitment. You’d think it wasn’t that much — but even this best laid-out plan wasn’t without its potholes. And strangely enough, Lily was one of them.

I pulled out the cell, searched for the right number and dialed it. “Hi, Arts. You won’t believe me but I really need your help tomorrow. Doing what? I’d like you to meet my parents.”

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Chapter 30

IT OFTEN HAPPENS that we wake up in a state of inexplicable anxiety which can only be compared to a panic attack. It can be caused by a nightmare or premonition of something bad about to happen, like short-circuited wiring or a burnt-out kettle. In my case however, it was completely different.

I woke up in a great mood. Julia was sleeping next to me. Bumpkin was rustling something up in the kitchen (I'd never gotten the chance to talk to him last night). Bright sunshine was pouring through the window. For some reason, it created the feeling of a Saturday morning when you're looking forward to a whole day of weekend laziness, the biggest gift of the whole workweek.

Still, the moment I climbed to my feet, my chest clenched in anticipation of imminent danger. My heart began to groan, threatening to stop. A wave of immense grief flooded over me, so desperate I wanted to hide from it under my bedcovers like a little boy and lie there frozen, hoping that the terrible monster would disappear from my room.

I barely made it to the bathroom and slumped under the shower. I felt so lousy I wanted to howl like a wolf.

No idea how long I'd spent just sitting there. It took all of my willpower to force me back to my feet. I turned on the cold water, stood under the freezing jets and gradually came round. The panic and the heart clenching grief were still there but at least they'd shrunk somewhere deep inside me, peeking out watchfully and biding their time.

"You like a good shower, don't you?" Julia said, waiting by the bathroom door. "I got up fifteen minutes ago."

I smiled. “Don’t know what came over me. I just couldn’t get out. You go and have a wash now while I fix some breakfast.”

I gave her a kiss and walked to the kitchen. Once there, I just slumped on a stool watching Bumpkin do his magic, flitting about Figaro-style. He toasted some bread to make his own *bruschettas* (which was a new culinary discovery for him, thanks to an advertising leaflet I’d hooked out of my mailbox); he cut up some sausage and laid the table, all at the same time, all the while avoiding meeting my gaze.

“So where were you last night?” I asked.

“What’s that for a question? I was at home, sleeping.”

“So you didn’t hear me when I came back? You didn’t hear me take a shower, change my clothes and leave again?”

“I might have heard something like that in my sleep. I was too tired. I’d had a lot to do.”

“You’re really overdoing it, you know. You’re constantly either cooking or cleaning. You probably need an assistant. Or even better, I could send you on a well-deserved vacation and hire a young goblin instead.”

“I don’t need no vacation! I have enough strength in me to last me another five hundred years! I wasn’t sleeping at all! I just popped out for a moment.”

“Exactly. Which brings us back to the question. Where were you last night?”

“I just popped over to see the neighbors’ kid. It can get really boring alone here all day. It’s more fun with him.”

“You mean Boris?”

“That’s right. He’s so funny. And he’s very clever with his hands. He cut the sulfur off a box of matches, ground up some potash, connected two bolts with a nut and poured the mixture inside. He even stuck an empty milk packet to it for better balance, just to make it fly better. I even followed him out of the house to see it go boom.”

“So that’s what you call ‘popping over to see the neighbors’ kid’? Did he even see you?”

“Do I look like an idiot? No commoner can see me if I don’t want them to. I can either turn into a dumb beast or just disappear from view — even if not for very long.”

“In that case, you’d better disappear now,” I hurried to say as I saw Julia leaving the bathroom.

“Who are you talking to?”

“To the cat.”

“So what did he tell you?”

“Just some bullshit about visiting our neighbors.”

“Listen, about tonight,” Julia said. “I still need to go home to get myself ready.”

“And I have something to do around Lenin Street.”

“What’s there, then?”

“I’d like to drop in on some old friends.”

She tensed. “No surprises this time?”

“I’ll come and get you in the evening and we can go see my parents. Scout’s honor.”

We had a nice quiet breakfast — which admittedly had become a bit of a luxury for me just recently — and left. Julia insisted we take a bus. No amount of Eloquence could persuade her to take a cab, so we set off for the bus stop.

Once I’d put her on the correct bus, I suddenly startled, sensing a hostile glare upon me. The feeling of panic began to grow within me. Having looked around and seeing nobody, I slumped down on a bench.

Initially, I’d been planning to catch a cab and speed over to the Seers’. That would have been the quickest way. Still, my heightened Perception made me restless. Not being an experienced secret agent, I couldn’t notice when I was being tailed, so I had to try and lose my pursuer. I could have done it right here if I’d wanted to, but I knew of more suitable locations.

I racked what brains I had and opened the map. I had to try to get to the metro and do my bit of magic there. The closest metro station was Burevestnik but I didn’t like it at all. Or rather, the entrance to it. The Burnakovskaya Station was much better. It had only one entrance, just on the side I needed.

I waited for my bus and climbed on board. I paid my fare and took a place at the back, looking out for any potential pursuers. Still, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t see anyone. All the people on the bus were commoners — not one single Player in sight.

Still, the feeling of danger wouldn’t leave me. Could I have caught some paranoia virus? Possible. In any case, I fully intended to stick with plan. If it turned out to be for nothing, no sweat.

At Burnakovskaya Station, I got off the bus and headed for the metro entrance, trying my best not to look back. Instead, I tried to

memorize every snow drift heaped up against the station’s large sunproof windows.

I negotiated the mud-splattered doors and started down the stairs. To my left, an old lady was wheeling her shopping bag down the ramp; a couple of Generation Z lovebirds were trotting along just in front of me in their identical rolled-up pants showing off their frozen bare ankles, sporting identical long bangs and suitably emaciated bodies. Shit, that’s not what I should be thinking about.

The station wasn’t busy so I had no hope of losing myself in a crowd. Having said that, I didn’t need to.

I hurried down the stairs. Here, the electric lighting left a lot to be desired, and the daylight seeping through the windows overhead wasn’t enough anymore. On one side, there were incredibly heavy metal-framed glass doors. If you lingered by one of those, it would mercilessly squash you. On the other side, there was a blind wall made of disgusting ceramic granite. That’s where I hunkered, watching the staircase I’d just come down.

Although I couldn’t see the entrance from this angle, I didn’t really need to. All I could see was part of the window and the steps which people took to come down. Curiously, the bigger the city, the less people tend to notice those around them. For that I was now eternally grateful to the gods of all the existing pantheons, Krishna and Buddha included. Someone might give me a fleeting glance, then hurry past on their way.

After about a minute, when I’d already started to suspect that my paranoia might had gotten the better of me, he finally turned up.

He was short and stocky with an aquiline nose which he seemed to be using to sniff around the station. Considering the mixture of odors hanging in the air, his behavior looked a bit suspicious. Still, my Insight — which now could identify any Player’s development branch — promptly butted in with an explanation. The guy following me was a **Scout**.

He sensed me even before he saw me. He twitched his nose and swung in my direction. I had no idea what kind of instructions he'd received in the case of his cover being blown — pretend he was part of the furniture or to do a runner — but I knew better than to wait for his reaction.

My Incremental Apparition only worked within a direct line of view. Which made me quite nervous as well. Technically speaking, the world behind the window *was* within my direct line of view. If my memory served me correctly, the window was only a couple of feet above the snow.

The question was, what was the probability of me getting stuck in the glass? And if I did, what was going to happen to my insides? Whose molecules would prove to be stronger — mine or those of the glass? Or would we just fuse into one?

Still, deep inside I'd already taken the decision. Fortune favors the brave, or so they say. I paused momentarily, trying to calm my desperate heartbeat, then cast the spell.

The sunshine assaulted my eyes. Snow crunched underfoot as I sank almost knee deep into the snow drift. I should have known that it hadn't yet been trampled by the weight of commuters. But still, I made it!

I clambered onto the hard surface as quickly as my own clumsiness allowed and darted toward the station's entrance, whipping out the knife. Hadn't Hunter told me that commoners couldn't see it? So much the better. The Scout guy had nowhere to run to; I'd blocked his only possible avenue of retreat. His only other potential escape route was by jumping on the train. But this wasn't Moscow where trains came and left every 90 seconds; ours arrived at much longer intervals, so catching up with him wouldn't be a problem. And then we'd talk. Because I didn't appreciate strangers tailing me around, interfering with my private life.

Still, what happened next managed to surprise me. As soon as I slid through the massive glass door, I froze, literally glued to the stairs —

because whatever happened below rather resembled an unequal wrestling match.

Two guys were hanging onto the Scout's hands while a third one was trying to say something to him. I got the distinct feeling that none of these Players were friends of his. This conviction only grew when the Scout headbutted the third one's jaw.

The Player recoiled, throwing his arms in the air. His jacket sleeves slid up, revealing the silver paint on his wrist. How curious.

"Hey!"

My exclamation had the exact opposite effect to what I'd expected. In my fantasies, the Player assaulted by the Scout was supposed to rejoice and welcome me with open arms. Or something along those lines. Instead, he waved to the others, and they all disappeared behind the doors that led to the platform.

Not so easy, mister! You won't get away from me!

I literally flew down the steps, fast enough to catch a glimpse of their backs as they fled. The one who'd had his feathers ruffled lingered momentarily behind the rest, trotted toward a cop and said something to him; then he threw his hand up, pointing, and hurried after his buddies.

"Excuse me, Sir!" the cop moved toward me. "Lieutenant Ugoev, can I have a word?"

I chose not to answer. Instead, I just ran my hand through the air, casting Smoke and Mirrors, and was about to continue my chase when I felt a heavy hand on my shoulder.

"Excuse me, Sir..."

My jaw very nearly dropped with surprise. I peered at him: no, this was a commoner standing in front of me. For some reason or other, the spell hadn’t worked. Should I try the Repelling Stone? The problem was, I didn't know how it might react in a confined space: I’d never tested it indoors before. Besides, would it even work? Seeing as Smoke and Mirrors hadn’t.

So before I embarked on any drastic action, I tried to strike up a courteous conversation:

“Whassup?”

“Would you mind following me, please.”

It was pointless arguing with him. The way he looked at me, I could tell that he could see right through me, including the contents of my inventory. Dammit. The only thing to do was to follow him as he didn’t take his eyes off me.

We squeezed into a tiny room with another cop sitting at a desk. My warden pointed at a chair. “Can I have your cell, please?”

I handed him my unblocked smartphone. He fiddled with it for a while, apparently checking IMEI, then handed it back to me and began interrogating me. My date of birth, place of birth, what I did for a living, etc. etc. He unhurriedly and meticulously entered all the information I provided into a thick brown notebook, then radioed through my particulars to somebody else.

Only then did he smile the ordinary smile of a commoner. The steely glint in his eye disappeared.

“I’m sorry, we’re just checking. We were briefed about some guy who’d been snatching ladies’ handbags at the station. You fit his description.”

I gritted my teeth, struggling not to tell him that I knew who'd "briefed" him. I just got out and ran down toward the trains. The police had been purposefully dragging their heels for a good ten minutes, so I didn't hold much hope.

Indeed, all four of them had already disappeared. I cussed, but didn't go back upstairs. Instead, I took a train to Moskovskaya Station and got off, still pondering over what had just happened.

So it looked like there had been some lousy Scout on my tail. Never mind. Although unpleasant, it made perfect sense. If I remembered rightly, there was that character, Hopper or whatever his name was, who seemed to be quite interested in my comings and goings. And he seemed to have a similar silver mark on his wrist. Which meant that I had at least two different Orders spying on me. I'd say more: two rival Orders, judging by their reaction to each other's company.

Admittedly, I was much more interested in the guys who wore those silver marks rather than in that hapless Scout guy. And there were only two people who could tell me anything about them. One was Hunter — whom I was going to meet quite soon, provided he hadn't lied to me. Still, I wasn't known for my patience — especially as I had a walking talking encyclopedia at my disposal; in actual fact, I should have asked Litius about the mysterious Order straight away.

As soon as I'd come out of the metro, I dialed Litius. Predictably, the number I'd reached was 'not in service'. I should have known better. He and Traug must have been drinking each other under the table all tis time. And I had no intention of going all the way to the Community just to get them.

Still, laziness can sometimes inspire us to some quite unorthodox solutions. You'd do anything not to have to do anything. So I just walked to the nearest newsagent and bought myself a small notepad with a silver gel pen, declining the vendor's kind proposal of also buying a gold, pink and

acid green one to go with it. What did she think I wanted to draw, My Little Pony?

I drew the sign I'd seen on the guy's wrist. Although it wasn't a particularly artistic attempt, I'd done so in several layers, with good attention to detail. My school art teacher who used to shudder at the sight of my horses and dogs would probably be reduced to tears.

After several unsuccessful attempts to take a photo of my artwork because of all the snow that kept falling, I finally found the right filter. At least now you could see it. I then sent the image to Litius through every possible messaging app, adding the following note:

"A wrist mark made with silver paint, worn by all Order members. I need to find out which Order it is and what it does. This is very urgent."

Once that out of the way, I headed for the Seers' residence. My conscience was clear but my head was heavy: I just couldn't shake off all those thoughts.

Even before I'd approached the residence, I noticed a bunch of weird things. Like a flood of Players all moving toward me, creating the impression they were all coming from the same place.

I studied their development branches with curiosity. Could it be that someone had relocated the Community while I'd been galloping through other worlds?

But that was only the beginning. Several covered trucks were parked up in front of the entrance, packed with armed people clad in camo fatigues. They were chatting and smoking; some were even smiling. There would have been nothing special about it, except they were all commoners. Regular soldiers camped out right in front of the Seers' residence.

The gates to the courtyard were wide open. About a dozen Players were bustling around the door. They were let in one by one.

My arrival didn’t raise any eyebrows. But the moment I tried to jump the queue, they all turned against me. One guy even promised to “beat my brains in”.

“What’s all the fuss about?” Hiss poked his carrot-topped head through the door. “Easy, guys. He’s one of us.”

His reference to me as being one of “them” made me chuckle but I didn't say anything. I really shouldn’t push my luck. I just shook his hand and walked in.

The residence had changed dramatically since I’d been here last. They’d added some furniture which lent the place a lived-in look. The sheer number of Seers had increased manifold, many of whom I simply didn’t know. I’d only shaken hands with a few when I saw Magister Oliverio and beelined straight to him, beaming. By now, it felt as if the guy was already an old friend.

“Sergei,” he greeted me cheerfully, “Nice to see you!”

“Likewise. Are you preparing to go to war?”

“Just trying to repel an assault.”

“So you even signed up some commoners?”

“We had to. Our guys aren’t enough. Although we joined forces with the Gatekeepers, a lot of Players chose to take a back seat. They prefer to watch from the sidelines.”

“Can’t say I blame them. We only have one life.”

“We also only have one world,” he said with a bitter smile. “Come on, then. The Grand Master will tell you everything personally.”

“Is he here?”

“Of course. I never thought that Nizhny Novgorod would become the final battlefield against the Horsemen of the Apocalypse.”

“The final, but not the last one.”

“If things don’t go according to plan, that’s exactly what’s gonna happen.”

We walked through all the familiar rooms toward the building’s far end. That was exactly where Arthan had been presiding the last time. I met him too, by the way. He nodded coolly, not showing any reaction to my arrival, and continued instructing the Players standing around him.

Having reached the right door, Oliverio tapped it and peeked in. “Sergei has arrived.”

“Let him in,” the Grand Master’s voice said. “And I’d like you to stay too.”

The shoebox that I’d visited last time had since turned into a small but rather comfortable office. It had fresh wallpaper, a massive desk, a couple of chairs and a bronze chandelier. The only thing missing was a portrait of the President on the wall.

‘Sergei,” the Grand Master rose to his feet, “Pleased to see you.”

Although he didn’t smile or welcome me with open arms, somehow I didn’t doubt the sincerity of his words. The Seers’ leader gave me a reserved handshake and went back to his desk.

Only now did I see what he’d been studying before we’d arrived. An enormous paper map of the city was spread out in front of him, covered in circles made with a marker.

I took a better look. All of them were within the Avtozavodsky District.

“Would have been easier on a computer,” I said, nodding at the map.

“I’m used to it. Oliverio is always saying I should learn to use all those new technologies. But it’s too complicated and I’m comfortable with it. You should see me getting lost in the maze of high tech worlds like Erich or even Smithy.”

“And what’s this, the Gettysburg battle plan?”

“Almost. This is the scheme of *our* future battle. The one which will unfold tonight. You probably haven’t heard yet. Today we’re gonna fight the Horsemen.”

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Chapter 31

AS THEY SAY, “If you want peace, prepare for war”. This old adage hasn’t lost its urgency in the millennia since it was first coined. It just became clouded with more maxims in the same vein. As in, “A nation that doesn't wish to feed its own army will have to feed someone else's” and “Any country has only two allies: its army and its navy”.

Numa the Grand Master knew what he was doing. As an old and experienced player, he knew you couldn’t sit it out while enemy looters were plundering your neighbor. Because eventually, they’ll come for you too.

“Oliverio had a vision of the battle. He couldn’t see it in every detail because there’re just too many variables involved. But at least now we know the approximate number of the enemy as well as the place and time when the battle will unfold.”

Since we’d last met, the Grand Master’s vitality had dwindled considerably. Before, he used to stand proud and youthful, his back as straight as a ramrod. But now he resembled someone tired and weary of life. His eyes were sunk in black circles, and whenever he furrowed his brow, deep lines creased his face.

“The problem is, both the Horsemen and their minions know that we know it,” he continued. “Which is why I expect them to resort to underhand tactics.”

“What do you mean, they know that we know?”

“I have a funny feeling we have a mole in the Order,” Oliverio added. “Someone from the lower-ranking creatures.”

“Are you serious? You’re Seers, for crying out loud! Surely you can sniff them out, whoever they are!”

“Unfortunately, all our present powers are now focused on curbing any potential sabotage by the Horsemen’s minions,” the Grand Master replied. “and I have to tell you we’re quite good at it by now. But you can’t be everywhere at the same time. Naturally, both Oliverio and myself have run checks on everybody we could. Mainly magisters and their assistants — in other words, all of the top brass, in addition to a couple of really suspicious newcomers. A lot of people have been willing to join us just lately. Still, all our checks drew a blank.”

“What makes you think you have a mole to begin with?”

The Grand Master shrugged. “The usual channels. A few leaks that only our members knew about. The attack on our residence here as well as on a few of our other houses in Europe. Interestingly, they all coincided with the moment when we’d managed to locate the Horsemen. The whole thing is too suspicious to be just a coincidence. As a result, we had to redeploy some of our forces, which didn’t pan out well in the end, allowing the Horsemen to escape the traps we’d set up for them.”

“So it looks like you’re preparing for a battle your enemy is well informed about.”

“The only people who know about our forces’ exact positions are the Order’s magisters. And I trust them.”

An awkward silence fell. My next question was begging to be asked — and I had the impression that Numa already knew it.

“So you need me, don’t you?”

“Funnily enough, we don’t.”

“What do you mean, you don’t?” I asked, puzzled.

“Our forces are quite sufficient. True, we had to turn to the commoners for help, but we can very easily do without Savior. Also, Oliverio didn’t see you in his vision.”

“If you say so,” I muttered, feeling lost.

Admittedly, I’d expected them to try and persuade me into joining them by hook or by crook. In which case I’d have been obliged to benignly accept their proposition and—

“I could take another look if you wish,” Oliverio said, offering his hand, “but just for your own peace of mind.”

After a moment’s hesitation, I laid my hand in his.

Nothing happened. My mind hadn’t teleported through time or whatever. Oliverio just closed his eyes, then opened them again.

His face was peculiar. Not scared really, but rather surprised and alarmed.

“What happened *now?*” I asked. “Did you see me take out a mortgage at a cutthroat rate?”

“Oh no, no, nothing of the kind,” he quickly regained his composure. “You’re gonna go see your parents tonight. I can see a lot of commoners, their faces are slightly out of focus. And one Player right next to you.”

“Playeress,” I corrected him. “That’s right. There’re no battles in store for me, then? I don’t need to dust my sword off?”

Oliverio gave me a funny look. The sort of look that old ladies give you when they don’t understand your jokes. Finally, he snapped out of his

stupor and energetically shook his head. “Oh no, not at all. This is going to be just a family dinner.”

I chuckled. “A family dinner my ass! I’d love to see you in my predicament! I would have gladly swapped my place with you.”

“There’ll be plenty of battles in your lifetime,” Oliverio said with a deadpan face.

How strange. He seemed to have changed before my very eyes. Only a few moments ago, he was this good-natured teddy bear, and now all of a sudden he’d turned into a frowning killjoy.

The Grand Master too seemed to have picked up on this metamorphosis. Still, he knew better than to pin his best advisor down with his glare.

“All right, then,” I said. “Seeing as you’re not especially interested in me...”

“We just don’t want anything bad to happen to you,” the Grand Master said.

“Well, in that case, I’ll be off, then. See you later.”

“Tomorrow,” Oliverio said confidently.

“Good. Which means I’m at least gonna survive tonight. One more question: you haven’t seen Hunter, have you?”

“No. But you’re gonna see him soon,” Oliverio said, avoiding my gaze.

“Well, have a good day and a great battle. I’ll see myself out.”

I left, shut the door behind myself, hung about for a bit, then pressed my ear to the door trying to make out what was going on back in the office. Shit, they were whispering. I couldn't make out a single word. I wish I'd had that ability, Big Ears or whatever it was called. Still, Oliverio's behavior had been admittedly very strange. It was as if he'd seen something...

Then again, what was I talking about? Of course he'd seen something! But what could it have been, provided I was only going to have a nice quiet (hopefully) family dinner?

Talking about which. I pulled out my cell and dialed Lily as I walked. By the time she'd picked up, I'd already cleared the community gates.

"Hello, brother."

"Hi, there, blabbermouth."

"Oh shit. I don't even know how it happened."

"It's okay. Still, I need to ask you something. Haven't you been recruited to attend tonight's dinner party too?"

"Yeah," she said without much enthusiasm.

"You think you could fail to turn up?"

"Easy. Only what am I supposed to tell Mom?"

"You don't need to tell her anything. In any case, she won't even ask you."

"Like hell she won't!"

"You watch. So what do you say to that?"

“I’d love to. I’d much rather go for a jog instead. I’ve taken up jogging in the evening, didn’t I tell you?”

How cool was that? It looked like my mental message had fit in her head just fine.

“You’re only going around the block, aren’t you?” I asked, remembering the upcoming battle.

“Sure.”

“Well, that’s fine then. Bye!”

“Bye...”

Good. Half of my job done. Now, Arts. I had to give her detailed instructions to make sure she didn’t goof up big time.

Still, before I could dial her, a message from Litius came through.

I momentarily wondered how the hell he’d managed to text me with those furry feline mitts of his. I imagined him dictating the message to Traug who punched it laboriously into the phone, and smiled against my will.

Sergei, you were right. This is the secret mark of one of the most ancient Orders in Cesspit. The first mention of it dates back to nearly two thousand years ago. It was created by twelve Players in order to protect a guy in possession of an extremely rare Avatar. Unfortunately, none of the sources mention the actual Player this was done for. But comparing the history of Cesspit with relevant events in other worlds, I can suppose that the Player in question possessed the avatar of Savior. The Order was then disbanded due to the betrayal of one of its members. I saw a few more mentions of it in the Middle Ages according to which, there were later sightings of Players bearing this mark who single-handedly interfered in the

commoners' affairs. None of the sources implied that the Order would ever be reinstated though.

An Order of twelve Players who'd tried to keep their Savior safe but failed because one of them had betrayed them... you didn't have to be Litius to put two and two together. A cold shiver ran down my spine. If you read something like this in a fantasy book, you risked being prosecuted for offending religious sensibilities.

The further it went, the faster this coiled knot of mysteries seemed to be unraveling. Why had Hunter had to get involved in the revival of the long defunct order? Or was he just its regular member? Then again, I had a funny feeling that my mentor wasn't the kind of person who'd agree to play the role of a humble pawn.

Never mind. We'd soon find out. I had more serious things on my agenda right now. I dialed the number and started with a question:

"Hi, where are you?"

To my surprise, Arts was at home. She gave me her address. It wasn't very close but what the hell. With your backside sat in a cab, it's actually quite quick.

The girl lived in a newly-built highrise with narrow sidewalks and a tiny playground fenced off by steel mesh. I could see that the place was a parking nightmare. Even now during the daytime, it was packed bumper to bumper. I dreaded to even think what it looked like in the evening. Infrastructure — what infrastructure? More like a bunch of badly conceived highrise apartment blocks stuck in the ground every which way just for the bucks — that's how we do it.

I dialed her entry code on the intercom. Arts opened without asking any questions.

The lobby was already rather the worse for wear, its walls streaked with black and lined with rows of dented mailboxes. A few of the elevator buttons had been molten by lighters. Oh well. When you move to a brand new building, you hope that everything will be just as fresh and new. What you tend to forget is that some people's brains are wired the wrong way. And one bad sheep is enough to create a bad impression of the whole flock.

"Are you getting out of that elevator or not?" Arts asked.

I shook my head to dispel the mirage. Trust me to start contemplating the fate of Russia whenever I've got a spare moment. A model citizen, so to speak.

I squeezed out of the elevator just as the doors were closing on me and chuckled, studying Arts.

"What's up with you?"

"Just not used to seeing you like this."

Indeed, she looked like a real commoner. A worn-out T-shirt, old gym pants and a pair of thick wooly socks. The only thing that betrayed her development branch was the pencil stuck behind her ear.

"Are you gonna stand like that forever? Come on in. Take your shoes off."

The experience was not really what I'd been expecting. She lived in a one-bed, clean and well-lit. The IKEA furniture, although not expensive, was still a cut above mine. The place was done up in Scandinavian style with plenty of gray and pastel shades. Nothing was out of place. Not a heap of stuff in sight. The door to her bedroom was shut, so we moved into the lounge which was joined with the kitchen, making it look absolutely enormous. The layout was infinitely better than mine, with large rooms seemingly built with people in mind. No idea what I'd expected her place to be like: probably, some sort of converted loft in an industrial zone.

“Nice and cozy,” I slumped onto the couch trying not to disturb the glass coffee table heaped with sketches — weapons, mainly. She must have honed her craft on these scraps of paper before transferring them into her magic album.

“Talking about tonight...”

“I got it. I need to pretend for your parents that I’m their daughter. Not a problem, I’ll just use Camouflage. Your Juliet will be the only one who’ll see me the way I am. Meaning, the way other commoners see me.”

“Her name isn’t Juliet. It’s Julia.”

“So much for your general knowledge,” she lounged in an armchair cross-legged.

“I do watch documentaries sometimes. Okay, not very often. Do they count?”

“As long as you don’t mention it in educated company.”

“Never mind. Listen up. Calling yourself Lily is only half the battle. You also need to behave like her. It’s not really hard. My sister is very quiet. She rarely joins in a conversation and argues even less.”

“A conformist, bah,” Arts screwed her face up.

“That’s where you’re wrong! Whenever she’s intent on doing something, she’ll bend over backwards but she’ll always get what she wants. But that’s irrelevant. Normally, she just sits there, eats and nods. And when she speaks, it’s always in monosyllables.”

“A real party queen. I got it.”

“Exactly. And that’s what you should be doing.”

“Show me her pictures. I need to know how to camouflage myself.”

I had to go online and peruse Lily’s social media accounts. I knew she was on Instagram but I wasn’t very proficient with it.

“I got it. Everything will be hunky dory. No sweat. Sitting there like a stuffed dummy can’t be that difficult, especially not with a free dinner thrown in. I just hope your mother — oops, sorry, our mother — is a good cook?”

“Some of her cooking can actually rival Bumpkin’s. But enough about that. I think I’ve just found out something interesting...”

As my story unfolded, Arts’ face grew increasingly puzzled, changing expressions from sarcastically haughty to anxiously fearful. How I understood her. I wasn’t very comfortable with the news, either. It’s at moments like these that you must feel the urge to become a commoner.

“So we don’t need to take part in the battle?” she asked. “Does that mean that the Seers didn’t even bother to ask us for help?”

This mention of “us” almost made me smile. “No, they didn’t. I didn’t know what to think myself. It’s not as if we’re strangers to them but still they ignored us. In the nicest meaning of the word.”

“Obviously, they know something,” Arts stood up and started pacing about. “And they’re purposefully not telling us.”

For some reason, I caught myself thinking that whenever she turned her back to me, I stared at the top part of her pants just below the elastic. Luckily, she didn’t seem to have noticed.

“Do you suggest we force an entry by the Grand Master’s and start demanding answers?” I asked.

“They won’t tell you anything. They’re real smooth bastards.”

“I agree,” I said. “So on this optimistic note I’ll be on my way. See you in three hours at my parents’ place. I texted you the address.”

“Keep your hair on. I’ll come prepared.”

I didn’t quite understand what she meant. All she had to do was wear her regular clothes with a jacket, and her Camouflage would take care of the rest.

I pulled my boots back on, grabbed my raincoat, called a cab and shot off to the only supermarket in town which held Glenfarclas ten-year-old single malt. Already standing in front of the shelf, I suddenly realized that a fifty-dollar gift would be a bit over the top for a humble college student (because it was Julia who was supposed to present Dad with the whiskey). So in the end, I chose a bottle of eight year old Grant’s. I just hoped I’d made the right choice: I was more of a beer or vodka guy myself.

I then bought a modest but nice bouquet for Mom. Having already left the kiosk, I reconsidered and went back for a second one. After which I finally went back to see Julia with an almost clear conscience. There wasn’t that much time left, and for some reason I was even more anxious than during my last meeting with the Darkest One. At least all he’d done was try to rip the sword out of my flabby guts without going on for hours about the meaning of life.

“Hello, Auntie Vera,” I said when she’d opened the door, handing her the flowers. “These are for you.”

“Oh, Sergei, you shouldn’t have.”

Yeah right. Tell me about it. I’d rather play it safe. Actually, I should have bought another bunch of leaves for Julia, seeing as I wasn’t exactly poor and could afford an extra daisy. Somehow I kept forgetting the two things that women seemed to appreciate the most: attention and little tokens

of affection. Not all of them, of course: only those between the ages of three and hundred and twenty-two. Without exception. Men don’t often seem to understand this, and therefore pay the price. Which ultimately tends to be more than a little costly.

“Is it already time to go?” Julia asked, peeking out of her room.

I looked doubtfully at her curled hair, her glossy tights and the dress trimmed with some kind of lacy stuff. I wanted to tell her this wasn’t a prom night. She probably did want to make an impression. My sarcasms would have only made the situation worse. And this wasn’t the right moment for her to get nervous. It was bad enough that I was.

“Not at all,” I said. “I just came a bit early, that’s all. You look great.”

She blushed like a rose and darted back into her room. You couldn’t ruin true beauty with funny hair and half a pound of makeup.

While the love of my life went on with the task of prettifying herself, I was obliged to keep Auntie Vera company. She was a good woman and quite a talker to boot. With her, you didn’t have to worry about keeping up your end of the conversation; all you had to do was nod and make agreeable noises. Provided you kept track of what she was saying.

In the next forty minutes — so excruciatingly long they felt like an eternity — I found out quite a lot about them. She’d told me that her husband had to work late and what a shame I couldn’t wait for him. She told me about her second-floor neighbor who brewed bootleg alcohol and sold it to young kids while the local beat cop didn’t give a damn. About her two friends, one of whom had opened her own business at the ripe old age of forty while the other one had gone to the university to become a philologist, then they fired her and she was now writing content for internet sites. Despite my half-hearted protests, I was fed two slices of apricot pie under the pretext of “whetting my appetite before the big dinner”.

So when Julia finally announced she was ready, I almost gave her a hug. Admittedly, I failed to see what she'd been doing to herself for the last forty minutes. It was probably something to do with her eyes which had always been big but now they were absolutely huge. Anime girls, eat your heart out.

Never mind. I had to focus.

"Julia, your warm hat!"

"Mom, I'll ruin my hair!"

"We're going in a cab," I butted in. "It's already waiting. I promise to make sure she wears it on the way back."

"No, I won't," Julia grumbled as she left the apartment.

"You don't need to," I said, kissing her. "Just put it away in your pocket. Let's go now."

We drove on a bit jittery, you could say. I cracked jokes, trying to distract her from the pending ordeal, and she even smiled back but she seemed completely blocked inside, unable to unwind. Admittedly, I couldn't relax either: I don't think I'd been so nervous even when I'd met her own parents.

A surprise awaited us by the front door: namely, Arts who gave me the impression she'd been looking out for us on purpose. Actually, it was even better that way. Had she gone in on her own, it would have raised unnecessary questions that could have easily blown her cover. And this way, Julia could serve as a distraction.

Arts looked suspiciously good. Her hair was meticulously done up; I even got the impression she'd had it straightened. She was wearing just a touch of makeup, her clothes too flimsy for the weather as usual but quite stylish. Having said that, this wasn't the right neighborhood to wear this

kind of look. It was a bit like Coco Chanel had decided to visit the slums of Paris. Which was weird considering no one but me and Julia was going to see her effort.

“Lily, this is Julia. Julia, Lily.”

“Nice to meet you,” Arts said in a strained fake voice.

“Likewise,” my girl replied, turning red as a beetroot. She must have still remembered the awkward moment when she’d surprised us on my sick bed. Oh well. Time to bring the situation under my control.

“We’re fifteen minutes early. But I don’t think our parents will kick us out.”

With a heavy heart, I dialed the code on the intercom and heard Mom’s indecently cheerful voice.

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Chapter 32

THERE'S NOTHING more awkward than official family dinners. Especially when you're told to "be yourself and let your hair down". Because the moment you hear that, you sit bolt upright, picking daintily at your food flashing modest smiles around like a complete imbecile. In other words, you start doing exactly the opposite.

Sometimes a single phrase can steer the whole evening in an unpredictable direction. Like that moment when Mom had let slip something about us "feeling at home". Which was probably why we were now sitting in dead silence over our *entrées* as if we were some blue-blooded royalty.

Judging by the sheer amount of food on the table, you would have said it was Christmas — and the number of courses yet to come suggested we could expect a shedload of invitees. I gazed at the stuffed sturgeon in fascination, frantically trying to remember which fork was for fish. This wasn't a family get-together: more like a young ladies' finishing school exam, with the examiners training their predatory eyes on the only student.

"Julia, what are you studying?" Dad asked.

I mentally thanked him for finally breaking the silence.

"What kind of question is that?" my youngest sister Darya asked, resting her head on her elbow. "One might think it's us giving Sergei away, not vice versa!"

"No one's giving anyone away here," I said, sensing my ears starting to burn.

“Oh really? Why are we here, then?” Darya asked, faking surprise. “I’m off to my room, then.”

“Darya, will you please stop teasing Sergei? And please take your elbows off the table already!” Mom interfered. “Julia sweetheart, so what are you studying?”

“Mechanical engineering, at our manufacturing technology school. But I’m almost finished. I only have my thesis to complete. And some onsite training to do in April.”

Arts smirked. “Nice! A shop floor student!”

Dad very nearly choked on his food. My Mom apparently hadn’t yet grasped the meaning of what she’d just heard. Darya smirked too.

As if trying to smooth out the effect of his last phrase, Arts added,

“Why didn’t you go to university? Was it too challenging?”

I all but stopped breathing with anger. That wasn’t in the agreement! According to which, Arts should only have spoken when spoken to. And instead, she’d jumped the gun and galloped head on into the thick of it!

Luckily, despite my reservations, Julia had kept her cool and replied with a soft smile,

“Not really. I just wanted to get a job and be independent instead of sponging off my parents. Some people don’t graduate until they’re thirty or something. How old were you, by the way, when you left uni?”

Unlike Arts, Darya was now laughing soundlessly, not even trying to pretend. Dad cast an anxious look at his bogus “daughter”; even my Mom was beginning to realize that the conversation was veering away from subjects suitable for young debutantes, rapidly plunging into the no-go depths reminiscent of Jerry Springer.

“Our Lily was twenty-three when she graduated with honors,” she hurried to interfere. “More salad, girls?”

“Yes, please,” Julia replied with a smile glued to her face while Arts did a credible impersonation of a boiling kettle.

I seemed to have somehow missed the moment when they’d developed this kind of a love hate relationship with each other. And the worst thing about it was, I couldn’t remove either of them now. That would create too many unwanted questions. All I could do was take the brunt of the fire and do my best to distract the company.

“Dad? What do you think of that whiskey?”

“It’s not bad, thanks,” he said, tight-lipped.

Before, I wouldn’t have even noticed it — but now that I had Observation Skills in my arsenal, I could see his tight lips, his squinted reply, his averted gaze. Which meant he was lying about the whiskey and I — or Julia, rather — must have missed the mark with our gift. Never mind. He could always take it to work and give it to one of his assistants.

“The flowers are beautiful, Julia, thank you very much,” Mom said.

Now it was Julia’s turn to blush, simply because she hadn’t done anything to deserve the praise.

“And where did you two meet each other?” my Mom went on grilling her. She just wouldn’t let it be, would she?

“At the bus stop. Sergei wasn’t feeling well.”

“At the bus stop?” Arts smirked. “Now why am I not surprised?”

“You weren’t feeling well?” Mom repeated, oblivious to everything else I’d said. “Sergei? What happened to you?”

“Nothing serious. A touch of vertigo, that’s all.”

“You absolutely need to go to the hospital. There must be a reason for it.”

Darya nodded. “Of course there’s a reason for it. He might start growing brain cells.”

“What’s with all of you here, a stand-up comedy competition? Julia, can I pour you another glass of wine?”

“Yes, please.”

“You be careful,” Arts said with a predatory smile. “Alcoholism is notoriously difficult to cure in women.”

“Lily, would you like some more potatoes?” Julia asked innocently.

“No, thank you. I don’t normally talk with my mouth full.”

“That’s exactly why I asked.”

“Let’s go for a break!” Dad said, slapping his knees. “Sergei? Join me for a bit of fresh air?”

“Julia, would you mind giving me a hand in the kitchen?” Mom joined in.

Arts was left in Darya’s company, but judging by the mischievous glint in my sister’s eyes, she was only too happy to oblige. She must have seen a new side to her normally demure big sister. The seventeen year old Darya was like walking reality TV: she loved everything to do with scandals, intrigues and investigations.

“The girls have got bees in their bonnets,” Dad said without even flinching from the bitter wind. You could tell a half-blood Korl when you saw one. “Do they know each other?”

“They met once although they never spoke.”

“The way they go at each other, you’d think that one of them had stolen the other one’s boyfriend. How’s your new job?”

“Okay.”

“You know, I’ve been meaning to tell you,” Dad faltered as if searching for the right words. “You did well. Finally you quit that menial job, and you found yourself a good girl too. So I just wanted to say... if you know what I mean...”

“Thanks, Dad.”

I felt a lump in my throat. It had happened too unexpectedly. I was too used to Dad scorning me, permanently unhappy with anything to do with my name. I could see that this moment of candidness didn’t come easy to him. So we just stood there on the balcony in silence, looking down — strange pastime, considering neither of us smoked anymore.

A phone call interrupted our uneasy silence. I pulled out my cell and saw Lily’s name on the screen. How weird. Normally, she never bothered me with calls. Had something happened?

“Who is it?” Dad asked.

“Just someone from work,” I replied, hanging up. “I’ll call them back later.”

“Okay, let’s go back inside, then. Let’s hope they’ve cooled down a bit. Personally, I can’t say I’m very warm.”

A suspicious calm hung in the room, the kind of lull before the storm when desperate swallows dart about hugging the ground. I tensed, sensing the tension with my very skin, and tried to give Arts the evil eye. She sniffed and averted her eyes. It looked like the fighters had had their break and were ready for the second round.

“Julia!” Mom, Arts and I said in unison.

Then they promptly shut up because my phone started ringing again. I had to leave the table to answer it — but before I even looked at the screen, a cold shiver had run down my spine.

My bad premonition hadn’t lied. It was Lily again.

“I’ll only be a moment,” I said. “I’ll be right back.”

I walked into the kitchen, closed the door and pressed the phone’s green button with trembling fingers.

“Hi Lil. What’s happened?”

“I’ll tell you in a moment.”

It wasn’t my sister’s voice. It belonged to a woman — soft, velvety and deep with it, which seemed to entangle you in a web of invisible threads. It took all of my willpower to shake off the trance she was casting on me.

“Who are you? Where’s my sister? What have you done with her?”

“So many questions! I heard that you were quick on the draw but I didn’t realize quite how quick. My name’s Omega. We’ve got your sister. I haven’t done anything to her. Yet.”

“You’re a Horseman. Er, a Horsewoman.”

“I prefer to be called a Horseman. They tend not to take women seriously. You and I might have a chat about all these things one day but not right now, I’m afraid. I’m in a bit of a hurry now. So let’s jump directly to the chase.”

“What do you want?”

“I want you, stupid. Me and my friends, we need you. A valiant idiot who’s managed to amass all those precious Avatars. So we’re waiting for you. But not for long. We’ve grown rather impatient through the years in captivity. You have ten minutes. If you don’t make it, your sister will die.”

My throat went dry. “Where,” I choked on the word, “where do I find you?”

“Listen to your own Intuition,” Omega said and hung up.

I put the phone back in my pocket and slumped against the wall. I was shuddering. My knees buckled. My temples were drenched in sweat.

Of course. Lily had gone for a run, hadn’t she? And it was only because of my stupid intervention that she’d decided to start working out. Dammit!

I tried to calm down and think logically. I shouldn’t panic because her life depended on my immediate action. I wiped the sweat away with a tea towel, took a few deep breaths to get a grip and walked out of the kitchen.

“Arts... er, Lily, can we have a word?”

Arts rose, looking grim. She deliberately pushed her chair aside slowly and walked unhurriedly toward me. I gritted my teeth. It took all of my composure not to fly at her and drag her off by force.

Finally, she ambled to the kitchen and shut the door. “Just please don’t preach. I was just trying to have fun.”

“They’ve got Lily.”

Her face changed. “Who?”

“The Horsemen. Omega has just called me. I’ve got very little time. I have to go.”

She shook a resolute head. “I’m coming with you.”

“No. I want you to stay with my parents. You’re the only person who can protect them. Because if something happens to them too...”

Arts opened her mouth to remonstrate but promptly closed it. My face must have betrayed some truly crazy emotions at that moment. I was quite prepared to kill her on the spot if she uttered as much as one word in protest. When she nodded, I dashed for the front door.

“I’ll only be a half an hour,” I said loudly as I left.

“Sergei, where are you going?” Dad asked, surprised.

“Just something that cropped up at work. I need to go and give them something... I won’t be long.”

“Sergei,” Julia offered.

“I’ll be quick. You won’t even miss me. See ya!”

I slammed the door shut and darted down the stairs without waiting for the elevator. Landings flashed past like trees in a bullet train window. The gray stairs flickered underfoot. I very nearly ripped the building’s

heavy steel door off its hinges. Gasping, I burst out into the frosty night and stopped dead in my tracks.

Now where to? How was my Intuition supposed to help me?

Never mind. I had to run. The first step is always the most difficult. The most important thing for me now was not to hang about.

I left the courtyard and walked down the street toward the bus stop. Then I froze. I crossed the street, ducked into a neighboring yard, walked right through it and entered the next one.

With every passing minute, my steps grew quicker until I got running again, tearing along blindly like there was a Rachnaid chasing after me. I ran through ever more backyards, onto another street, past all the parked cars and lampposts flickering like burning candles.

Your Indefatigability skill has increased to level 1.

Which Indefatigability? I glanced at my Vigor meter. It was empty, its bar at zero. And there I'd been wondering why I had this taste in my mouth like I'd been licking a door handle. I had a stitch in my side which felt like it was pierced by a knitting needle.

Still, I couldn't stop now. I had little time left. Very little.

My efforts didn't resemble running anymore. If anything, I must have looked like a panicking snail trying to escape a watchful predator. I spat thick blobs of saliva, occasionally coughing, but still I carried on. Just one more push. And then some. Just to cross the next yard.

Your Indefatigability skill has increased to level 2.

I was about to drop face down in the snow and gasp like a knackered horse. And I'd almost done it when I finally saw her.

My sister was sitting in the middle of a kids' playground, tied to a chair. The old swings and a slide had been ripped out of the ground and flung to the side. Further up, I saw smashed trash cans and upended benches, meaning that the entire space within sixty feet of her was devoid of anything other than deep gutters in the ground, illuminated by the lampposts which somebody had turned toward Lily. To the right and left of her, there was nothing but impenetrable darkness.

This looked like some cheap mafia action flick from the '90s. The only thing missing was the burly figure of a Russian hood.

The other thing that surprised me was a total absence of life. Some of the windows in the surrounding houses were lit up; I could even make out some shadows flitting behind the window curtains; but the street itself was completely deserted.

I stood with my hands on my knees, trying to catch my breath and thinking. You didn't need to be a brain surgeon to see that the place was a trap. What I'd have loved to know was what the Horsemen were up to and how they were going to proceed.

Lily noticed me — but instead of rejoicing she just shook her head. *No?* No what? A trap? That little was pretty obvious. I crouched, gasping heavily, unable to stand up straight.

A car's motor roared to life, blinding Lily with its headlights. Judging by the sound, it was an SUV which sped off, throwing up chunks of slush and frozen earth. I could clearly see where it was heading.

[∞]

No idea where I got the strength from. This was probably what they call second wind. From what I'd read, its arrival was supposed to make the going easier — but not in my case. I just wanted to spit out my lungs, curl up and die. And had it concerned me alone, I would have done just that.

But I had my sister right in front of me: scared, bound hand and foot and gagged with a large piece of cloth. And to my left, some anonymous sonovabitch had already turned the key in the ignition.

Still, I was closer. And quicker. My muscles wanted to explode with the strain; my tendons were about to snap like rotten old threads; my bones struggled to separate themselves from the flesh. I screamed in desperation, unable to withstand the strain and agony. I kept running toward Lily, my eyelashes wet from the tears welling in my eyes, and screamed like a cornered wild beast which knows it's about to die.

I made it. I leapt onto Lily knocking her over, chair and all, and tumbled head over heels, rolling both of us over the filthy snow.

I made it! The SUV sped past, missing us, and braked to a stop further on.

I wasn't breathing anymore — I was wheezing and sobbing. My last strength had left me; my arms felt weak and numb. Still, I freed Lily from the gag and began to untie her.

You've saved the life of a Commoner who is friendly to you.

"Sergei, no," were her first words.

"It's all right. We'll get out of here now."

"You shouldn't have touched me. It's down there under the chair—"

She didn't finish. My ears popped from the mother of all explosions which felt like the sky itself had fallen to earth which shuddered from the impact.

I, too, shuddered with it. Only when the cloud of dust had consumed us, did I realize what had just happened.

A huge highrise apartment block crumbled to the ground nearby — probably, in the neighboring yard.

“There was a detonator!” Lily sobbed. “They planted it under me! They said, if I moved, it would all go boom. That’s what they said, Sergei!”

In the meantime, I stared, transfixed, at the flurry of messages flashing before my eyes. This just couldn’t be happening.

You’ve killed a Commoner who was neutral to you.

-100 karma points. Current level: +5080. You gravitate to the Light Side.

You’ve killed a Commoner who was neutral to you.

-100 karma points. Current level: +4980. You gravitate to the Light Side.

You’ve been stripped of your status: Illustrious

You’ve killed a Commoner who was neutral to you.

-100 karma points. Current level: +4880. You gravitate to the Light Side.

The messages kept flooding in, filling the entire space before my eyes. I thought they’d never stop. A single word pulsated in my brain like a throbbing vein: I’d *killed*.

My breathing seized; my vision darkened. It couldn’t be possible. I hadn’t done anything! All I’d done was save my own sister!

Finally, the flurry of log entries had stopped. According to the last one, my Avatar of Light was now about as useless as a chocolate teapot:

You've killed a Commoner who was neutral to you.

-100 karma points. Current level: –680. You gravitate to the Dark Side.

We were sitting in the snow. Lily wept, covering her face with her hands, half-bound and half-freed while I stared into space, glassy-eyed.

Finally, I turned my gaze to the place where my sister had sat only a few minutes ago. She'd been right: I saw a small box which her chair must have been resting on. Next to it lay an artifact which looked suspiciously like... like...

I pulled out the Repelling Stone. It looked identical.

My tears had frozen on my eyelashes, gluing them together. Thick clouds of steam came out of my mouth, and still I was incredibly hot. My chest felt squeezed; I gulped mouthfuls of air, unable to get enough. My neck was soaking; hot sweat trickled down my back, making my sweater cling to my skin.

I still couldn't quite take in what had just happened, the way we can't accept the death of someone near until we get used to the thought.

They'd set me up. They'd tricked me. They'd reset me back to zero.

I looked at the SUV. A Player had already climbed out of it: a tall burly guy whose development branch was apparently Light Bug. The only thing was, he wasn't looking at me: he stared in the opposite direction.

Transfixed, I traced the direction of his gaze and saw three figures emerging from the shadows.

They exuded power. They brought fear with them. Even before I got the chance to see their development branches, I knew who it was standing

in front of me.

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Chapter 33

FACED WITH THE INEVITABILITY, we're normally reduced to humble acceptance. You wouldn't be screaming at a stream of lava pouring down the mountain side, blaming it for destroying your house. As you wouldn't curse a tidal wave several stories high for sweeping away everything in its path. You wouldn't shake your fist at crumbling buildings during an earthquake.

This might give you some idea of how I felt: a mixture of fatigue and hopelessness. In an ideal world, I should really be thinking about getting Lily out of here but my head was empty of all thought.

In the meantime, the Horsemen were getting closer. Wrapped in long traveling cloaks falling below their ankles, they looked like some sick historical reenactment society. Although not modern, the cloaks looked relatively new. Just think that someone was still trading in this kind of crap.

I could second-guess their names from their development branches which I could see quite clearly. The brazen guy with a mop of red hair and a young face spoilt by too much spare time was undoubtedly ***Slayer***. He was tall and lanky with jeering eyes, as if he'd just heard a joke that you shouldn't tell in polite society. He was walking half a pace behind all the others.

To the left of me — and to the right of Omega — was the dark-haired ***Austerius***. With his looks, Hollywood would have loved him. His sharp cheekbones and nose, while doing nothing to make him dislikable, seemed to draw your eye to every little feature on his face. There was something mesmerizing about him, something that made you notice him. He walked almost in step with Slayer although showing no intention to overtake him.

The third member of their small band was Omega herself. She walked unhurriedly as if weighing up her every step, her hands almost motionless by her sides. Her face was concealed by an eyeless and noseless white mask which appeared almost waxen. Her hair was thin and faded; once gray, it had long lost any semblance of color. She seemed to avoid making any extra movements as if afraid of wasting the last of her energy.

About a dozen more Players emerged from the darkness, keeping a respectful distance from that warped Trinity. I got the impression I knew one of them; still, right now I couldn't take a better look at them because the Horsemen were already a mere thirty feet away from me.

Then they stopped. Or rather, Omega stopped. Slayer and Austerius exchanged glances and froze next to her.

"What a disappointment," Slayer said. "We've been so careful. We've taken such a roundabout route hoping to shake our pursuers off our trail. And what for — for *this*? Had I known, I would have headed straight here."

"Morbian had already paid for his arrogance," Austerius replied. "You shouldn't repeat his mistakes."

In an uncharacteristically swift motion, Omega thrust her hand up, motioning them to shut up. The subject matter must have really been getting to her.

I stared silently at the black eyeslit of her mask. She stared back at me, studying me closely for a long time. The Horsemen stopped dead in their tracks; the other Players had frozen in place like living statues; even the light from the lampposts had changed, insipid and fake.

"You're just a boy," she said in the same voice I'd heard on the phone earlier.

I startled as if I'd been slapped. A surge of fear overcame me, forcing me to use my most trusted weapon to defend myself: sarcasm.

"And you must be the granny," I said. "I'm afraid the old folks' home is the other side of town. Would you like me to walk you there?"

"I could rip his cheeky tongue out even before he dies," Slayer offered.

The mask swayed toward him. "What, to make us lose two such valuable Avatars? You mustn't forget we need to kill him all together at once. And as for punishing him," a shadow of a smile flitted across her face, "we still have another Player. Arthan!"

Austerius swung round. Slayer twisted his face into a nasty smile, making it clear that the punishment was going to be tough.

A burly man left the group of players and hurried toward the Horsemen.

Oh well. There's no such thing as a coincidence. I knew his face all right. I even used to think that we were sort of friends. "Sort of" being the operative word.

"Hi Arthan," I nodded, getting up and pushing Lily behind my back. "Or should I say, 'Arthur of Camelot'?"

Everything fell into place. The treacherous banneret. The Seers hadn't checked the Order's lowest ranks, had they? The Grand Master had investigated all the Magisters and Adjuncts — but he'd never got around to checking Arthan. Besides, who would have suspected him of all people, after he'd spent centuries with the Seers, to be the very turncoat we'd been after?

"It's not exactly Camelot," he said. "It's Cavallon. Those stupid commoners can never get it right. So you knew, didn't you?"

“The errand knight; the master swordsman; the king of a fallen kingdom. The only lie you told me was that you’d been born already after the Horsemen’s imprisonment. You said you’d never met them before. Although I even know which one of them found you.”

Omega smiled. “Oh really?”

“*Morbian went to rule the Huns, Slayer the Visigoths, Austerius the Vandals and Omega the Celts,*” I quoted.

“That’s right. I used to rule the Saxons at the time. That’s when I met Arthur. He used to be in charge of a handful of Players living out a bunch of mythical ideas such as justice, equality and valor,” Omega smirked. “How can people be equal or just? There’s always someone who’s richer and therefore more influential than others while someone else might be cleverer than the rest. Luckily, the boy seemed to be bright enough to promptly join the right side. And I took a liking to the Celts. They’re unbridled barbarians and excellent fighters.”

“Shame you didn’t gain anything from it because Morbian had outsmarted you all.”

“Exactly. And then you denied me the pleasure of killing the traitor with my own hands. Never mind. I might still glean some enjoyment from watching you suffer. Arthan! Punish him.”

Arthan’s sword lit up, lending the snow the color of amber drowning in blood. Then he went for me.

I hurried to cast two Mantles on myself — but Omega clapped her hands, stopping the traitor. Even I stopped and stood up straight, having already drawn my dagger and my Katzbalger.

Omega launched two thorns at me from the palm of her hand, removing my protection.

“Enough of this bullshit,” she said. “We have no intention of having a mana competition here. And Arthan, please, don’t you kill him. All you can do is maim him a little bit.”

Arthan nodded. His glowing sword expired. He stepped closer to me and struck out lightly without any hope of overcoming my protection, as if he was simply testing my defenses. Even the few meager abilities I had was enough to dodge his attack.

“So, Arthan — or should I say King Arthur? — do these bastards pay you more than the Seers?” I asked.

“You’ll never understand. It’s not about money,” he said, trying to get behind me while watching my every move. He feigned a lunge and dealt me a proper blow. My shoulder exploded in pain.

[∞]

I barely managed to dodge his attack and slashed out at him with my dagger. The moon steel drew an arc through the air and got a good taste of my enemy’s blood. The fabled swordsman king sprang aside and ran his hand over the wound which unfortunately wasn’t as deep as I’d hoped it would have been. Still, the sight of blood trickling down his clothes gave me some hope.

“Slayer, look, he’s just as fast as you are,” Austerius said without a shadow of sarcasm.

“I don’t think so! Omega, may I? I wanna show you something.”

With another swift thrust of her hand, she motioned him to stop. Slayer promptly shut up, biting his lip, while Arthan resumed his advance, moving in a series of rapid lunges.

If the truth were known, he was every bit as good as Hunter — even better at certain moments. I simply continued to retreat, knowing full well that sooner or later they were bound to corner me.

Which was exactly what happened. Arthan’s sword sank into my belly. I could have sworn it had hit the same spot as the Darkest One had struck.

Pain. Darkness. I heard Omega gasp in fear. That’s the kind of fear one feels for a lamb destined for slaughter if it gets run over by a truck. Don’t worry, Your Apocalyptic Majesty; as long as Sergei had enough time rewinds, he was certain to put up a good fight.

[∞]

I barely managed to step aside, swinging around to reach for Arthan’s flank and his outstretched arm. Even if I hadn’t been armed, I could have given him a good kick, simply because the chance was too good to miss.

My sword and dagger glanced off his ribs — admittedly with various degrees of success. The wound from the Katzbalger seemed to be wide but not deep. The dagger in contrast had only left a hair-thin mark — but I had felt it grazing bone.

Your Short Blades skill has increased to level 22.

Arthan cried out and recoiled, covering himself with his sword. I tried chasing after him, only to get a fist in the face. Had he not been wounded, he might have even tried to counterattack.

I wiped the blood off my lip and tried to outflank him, gasping heavily.

“Arthan, what made you turn coat?” I asked softly, making sure the Horsemen didn’t hear me. “Have you stayed loyal to Omega all these years?”

He screwed his face into an agonizing grin. “You still don’t get it, do you? It’s not about loyalty or even valor.”

He took another swing with his sword, but he was only going through the motions. His strength was leaving him together with the blood that was now seeping from his wounds.

“Being a coward is not so bad,” he said, his movements getting sluggish. “Cowards live longer, even though no one writes songs about them.”

“Enough!” Omega snapped, realizing things weren’t going according to her plan. “Arthan! Come over here!”

His remaining strength was just about enough to get back to her without staggering. He was trying to walk unhurriedly with his back straight — apparently in order to keep his balance — leaving two bloody trails in the snow behind him as if he were a marionette pulled by red strings. Once he’d got closer, he lowered his head.

“I know Arthan for a long time,” Omega said in a pointedly loud voice. “He was a faithful dog and a valorous warrior. Such a shame he cracked up,” she laid a hand on his shoulder.

Then a strange thing happened. His body began to deform like a sheet of paper in a hot oven. The only difference being, there was no oven. He seemed to be burning from the inside, quickly and completely. The poor bastard didn’t even get the chance to say anything. In under two seconds, he’d crumbled apart in deafening silence.

The Players didn’t make a sound. They neither protested nor exchanged whispers. Not even an exclamation of fear came from them.

They just accepted Arthan’s death as something unavoidable. Something they couldn’t argue. Something that couldn’t be avoided.

Slayer took a step forward. “I’m gonna drag him to your feet.”

“Don’t!” Omega exclaimed, then added in a more relaxed tone, “You mustn’t forget he’s a Time Master. He can rewind time. That’s why the bomb had a delayed action. It’s not easy fighting a Player who knows every step you’re gonna take. Austerius will drag him here.”

The dark-haired horseman gave a curt nod. If Slayer’s face betrayed a whole range of emotions, Austerius remained cool as a cucumber. As he walked, he drew a sword from his inventory — a longsword, to the best of my knowledge. With every two steps, he would swing it and strike out at me.

I dodged his first blow, clumsily parried the second one, but his third one nearly got me, grazing my ear — and his fourth one got my leg.

Lily cried out. Slayer let out a triumphant yell as if it was him who’d hit me.

Well, I shouldn’t celebrate too soon.

[∞]

Nothing happened. I was still standing on one leg, dragging the wounded one behind me. Austerius stood in front of me, watching my blood drip down his sword.

There’d been no time rewind.

[∞]

The pain from the wound, however superficial, began to spread over my whole body. Stupefied, I suddenly realized that time wasn't gonna rewind itself.

Panicking, I checked my interface: I had enough charges for two more rewinds but still they didn't work, for some reason. Why was that?

The amount of emotion of my face must have spoken volumes because Austerius began to explain,

"I'm a Disabler. Players who are standing near me can't activate their development branches. Just an ability I have. Sorry about that."

There was no sarcasm in his voice. He was simply stating the obvious. As in, you're dead meat, Sergei. You've played your only trump card and left it on the table. You've got no more good cards in your hand. Not to even mention the Joker.

As soon as I thought about it — and as soon as he stepped forward, raising his sword — the wiry figure of another Player stepped out of nowhere, unwinding like a coiled spring. Before I could realize what had just happened, Austerius was already lying on his back, knocked down by my mentor's powerful hook.

"Here comes the cavalry," Omega said grimly. She wasn't looking at Hunter — in fact, she was looking at something behind my back.

She knew how to build up suspense, the bitch! I swung round. A good fifty Players were already walking toward us from the direction of the abandoned car where Light Bug had been standing earlier. I glimpsed a few familiar faces in the crowd even though I couldn't remember where I'd seen them before.

Two men walked in front, slightly apart from the rest. One was ancient, feeble and hunched, the other about forty years old.

“I don’t wish you a pleasant day, Omega,” the old man said.

“Matthew and Simon! I actually thought you were dead for quite a while. You all disbanded, didn’t you, after your little fishing club fell apart?”

“We spent many years roaming the world after our Savior’s actual death,” the younger one spoke — the one she’d addressed as Simon.

“Oh please. Spare me your sermonizing. So you’ve come to defend this little brat, haven’t you?”

“This is our destiny, I’m afraid. The Savior shouldn’t be killed. His Avatar can’t be besmirched.”

“Why besmirched? Can’t you see me as the greatest Light Player of all times? I promise to raise my karma. I even promise you to stop killing... at least personally.”

“You love using other people to fight your own battles,” the old man said. “How many of your followers are now dying in the city?”

Omega shrugged. “They’re not my followers. They’re cannon fodder. I didn’t ask them to come to me and beg at my feet. It was their decision. Also, I had to do something to divert the Seers’ attention. A large battle like that would sufficiently distract them from one tiny little scuffle and the death of one single Player. No, scratch that: it’ll be more than one Player now. The battle started as soon as that building had blown up. To tell you the truth, I didn’t expect Cesspit to have become so technologically advanced. Before, we would have had to set up a whole lot of traps just to kill enough people to sufficiently lower his karma.”

While she’d been saying all that, her followers had finally approached her. No idea how they knew it was time to act. She might have given them some kind of sign — or she could have even been using telepathy to coordinate their actions. Nothing could surprise me anymore.

“But at the end of the day, it doesn’t make much difference where you die. Does it, Matthew?” Omega lowered her head as if deep in thought, then thrust her hand in my direction. “Slayer, Austerius, make sure he doesn’t escape while we have some fun with the Order.”

After that, things began to unfold at a truly breakneck speed. The two Horsemen dashed toward me while Omega’s minions hurried to intercept those wearing the silver marks on their wrists. The latter hurried toward me too — apparently in order to defend the only person they’d come here for: namely, yours truly.

The sky lit up with a rainbow of iridescent spells. Their blazing light blinded me as the air itself seemed to explode; the earth shook underfoot; the snow began to melt from the heat of the battle. The silver marks kept driving the magicians back while the latter defended themselves by firing some weird artifact weapons which killed with one shot and ignored all kinds of protection.

Both Austerius and Slayer threw themselves at Hunter; the others too were already locked in a desperate hand-to-hand. And I just stood there, shielding my sister with my body and gawking at the scene.

Hunter swung round to face me. “Sergei, get going!”

The words had the effect of a slap in the face. I drew Lily toward me, helping her to her feet. Limping, I made a dash for the safety of darkness. Lily hindered my advance, heavy and cumbersome as a sack of potatoes and completely oblivious of what was going on. I had to literally haul her away.

“Slayer!” Austerius’ voice resounded.

A flurry of snow rose into the air. Something invisible hit me in the chest. As I dropped, I saw Slayer standing there legs akimbo grinning at me. Little piece of shit.

My hand flew out on its own accord. A Combat Telekinesis spell spilt from my fingertips. Now Slayer wasn't so cheerful anymore. It's not so easy to grin when your back hits the frozen ground. Judging by the sound, the impact had rearranged his vertebrae a bit. That was really stupid of him. Didn't he know you always have to warm up before a fight?

I'd almost managed to scramble back to my feet when I was flattened by his punch. Of course. How stupid of me. He must have simply activated his Nimbler skill which had allowed him to scramble back to his feet, get closer to me and try to perform plastic surgery on my nose while I was still struggling like a beached whale trying to get up.

But even that wasn't set in stone.

[∞]

While I was still trying to get to my feet, I positioned my knife at the exact spot where he was going to punch me, blade outwards. The resulting impact rocked me but my makeshift block had worked like a dream. I even got the impression that at the last moment, Slayer had attempted to snatch his hand away but it was already too late.

"Shit!" he groaned, nursing his bleeding hand.

You could say that. I'd done a nice job on that hand of his which now looked like a juicy open grenadine. The way his blood was gushing, you'd think he had gallons to spare. I jumped at my chance: I had to act now while he was busy suffering.

I darted toward him, aiming my dagger at his leg. Now he might find it hard limping after my sister. I'd even managed to take a swing before a sharp pain burned my ear. Blood poured all over my shoulder: apparently, he had better reaction times. And still, he wasn't going to have the last word.

[∞]

I ducked even lower and managed to reach his thigh, slicing through it with my knife (my Katzbalger wasn't handy in this particular setup). I then slid behind him, bashing him with the hilt of my sword and stunning him. I'd have loved to finish him off but time was at a premium. I grabbed Lily's hand and dragged her away from that place.

Only when we'd reached the unlit stretch of the road did I let go of her hand.

"Get away from here," I fleetingly turned to face her.

"But what about you?"

"Just go! Please!"

Sobbing, she nodded and darted off toward the nearest corner.

I turned back, feeling my blood boil with fury. I felt like a dead man. A walking dead.

There were only three people left of the entire Order of Silver Mark: Simon, Hunter and some Player I didn't know. As for the Horsemen's minions, they'd only lost five men. And now Austerius and another one of his sidekicks were forcing Hunter back.

I blew a short breath and got moving, clenching my teeth and overcoming the agonizing pain. As I ran, I cast another Combat Telekinesis, sweeping Austerius' henchman away. He didn't even black out, just flew a dozen feet through the air, but even this was a small but neat victory.

Your Mysticism skill has increased to level 12.

Even Austerius caved in and took a few steps back. With his type of skill, all he could trust was his sword and his own firm hand.

I stopped next to Hunter. He was exhausted.

That’s when I realized that this was the last lull before the surge of the tidal wave that was the Horsemen.

Omega squeamishly flung aside Simon’s dead body burnt from the inside. “Why would you live for thousands of years if you don’t even bother to level up your combat skills?”

Simon’s deformed frame dropped onto the snow and disintegrated.

“So!” Omega turned to us. “Where were we now?” she headed unhurriedly toward us, followed by her surviving followers.

The Player I’d assaulted with my spell scrambled back to his feet, groaning. Austerius just stood there waiting for his mistress.

“Sergei,” Hunter said under his breath, “You’ve got to do something now.”

“Beg your pardon? I think I’ve already done everything I could.”

“Listen to me. This is very important. The fate of our world hangs on it — and probably all the others too,” he blurted out. “If they kill you and snatch the Avatars...”

“What are you two talking about?” Omega asked. “Tell us all about it! I’m quite curious what two caged mice might have come up with.”

I wasn’t listening to her. Because Hunter was just telling me things which I found hard to process. Terrible, sacrilegious things which went against nature itself and our relationship with it.

Did he really think I could do something like that?

“Sergei, I’m afraid it’s the only option. And that’s my choice. I’ve been preparing for it.”

“Pardon me!” Omega was becoming restless. “At the end of the day, it’s not polite!”

She stood about a dozen feet away with her hands on her hips. Only now did I realize that the wretched white-masked abomination hadn’t even drawn her weapons. She killed with her bare hands.

“Sergei, please,” Hunter’s voice quivered, about to break. “I beg you. For me and my wife; for everybody who lives here. That’s exactly what they gave you the moon steel for.”

Everything collapsed inside me. “Very well.”

“Please don’t overthink it. We don’t have the time. I’ll help you.”

Hunter turned toward me and slapped me across the face. “Come on, you little shit, do it!” he shouted.

So I hit him. I slashed out at him without looking because my eyes were full of tears.

I heard him heave a sigh of relief, followed by Omega’s surprised yelp. And then...

By fighting against your own Mentor, you’ve committed an act of deceit and betrayal!

-300 karma points. Current level: –980. You gravitate to the Dark Side.

You’ve killed a Player who was friendly to you.

-200 karma points. Current level: –1180. You gravitate to the Dark Side.

Your reputation has changed to Traitor.

New characteristic received: the Dark One

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Chapter 34

QUITE OFTEN IN OUR LIVES, we're faced with a momentous event which becomes a turning point, dividing our existence into "before" and "after". Our old world crumbles, bringing down its daily routine, its values and connections. As a result, you stand there feeling completely lost. It might take you an awful long time to find a new avenue in life, reinvent yourself and figure out what you're meant to do now.

My situation was different. As soon as one door closed, another one opened. Before I'd even realized that I'd just killed my mentor with my very hands, a new system message unfurled in my mental view.

A change in development branch available: Shadow. In order to activate it, you need to select it as your new development branch within the next 24 hours.

You've gained a Divine Avatar: Guide.

You've gained the Counter Attack skill.

You've gained the Paralysis spell.

Your fame has increased to 15.

You've unblocked a Divine Avatar: Destroyer. Unlocking additional abilities requires 2000 pt. Dark Karma.

You've unblocked a Divine Avatar: Conqueror. Unlocking additional abilities requires 2000 pt. Dark Karma.

Everything around me seemed to happen in slow motion. Too slow, in fact. Omega's hand rose silently, pointing at me. Led by Austerius, her

sidekicks obeyed the order and headed toward their victim, so unhurriedly slow as if it were happening in some funny TV sitcom.

Only I wasn’t laughing.

My mind was surprisingly clear. I knew I had only one way to defend myself — the one used by the Darkest One. Especially seeing as both my Avatars — two black masks which looked as if they were covered in soot — hovered in the air in front of me. One was glittering as if sprinkled with powdered gemstones; the other was matte, making it almost irresistible to touch it.

The former one drew my attention first. It was the one I’d taken off the Darkest One. I’d had it for a long time already.

Divine Avatar: Destroyer

Current abilities:

Mind control

Allows you to submit any Player or commoner to your will and control them. The ability deactivates after use or after the subject’s death.

Use: long-range. Maximum range: 150 ft.

Duration: 2 min.

Cooldown : 9 days

Spilling the Beans

Allows you to persuade any sentient being to reveal their innermost secrets to you.

Use: local, requires physical contact (touch) with the being whose secrets you'd like to know.

Cooldown: 4 days

Impermeability

Allows you to create protection against all possible spells and types of weapons.

Exceptions:

1. The abilities coming with the following Avatars: Savior, Restorer, Designer

2. The swords of the first Gatekeepers

Use: on self

Duration: 3 minutes

Cooldown: 13 days

The second mask was just as interesting.

Avatar: Conqueror

Current abilities:

Cavalry Charge

Allows you to create a power wave capable to destroying any structures built by commoners. Wavelength: 45 ft. Waveheight: 15 ft.

Use: local, requires physical contact (when touched by any limb or weapon) with the structures you'd like to destroy.

Cooldown: 10 days

Panic

Allows you to put ten of your enemies to flight, making them feel unable to defend themselves and forcing them to scramble to safety without any order

Use: long-range

Duration: 1 minute

Cooldown: 5 days

Leader

Allows you to bestow additional armor on a subject and increase the damage they deal by any kind of weapon.

Use: on self

Duration: 4 minutes

Cooldown: 3 days

I felt no emotions; no anger nor weakness. My soul was consumed by the void within me. I didn't have the strength to resist it.

I reached out and equipped Destroyer's Avatar.

The world around me changed. The lamplight became dimmer; the white snow had turned gray. The faces of my enemies blurred, losing almost all of their features and contours. It was as if I was looking at the world through dark glasses, without seeing any details — which admittedly I didn't need.

Because everything was dust and would return to dust. Sooner or later.

The moment I thought about Impermeability, it enshrouded my shoulders like a silk mantle. Thin and weightless though it was, I now knew I couldn’t be injured by anything these Players were holding in their hands. Next to me, they were but helpless paper cutouts.

A burly Player attacked me first, his shoulders so broad that two of me could fit on each of them. His development branch was **Berserker**, making it clear his two-handed sword was meant for better things than manicuring his nails. His problem was that his dreadful sword just bounced off my body like it was made of Chinese PU foam. Admittedly, I did wobble a bit but no more than that.

This was probably one of those moments you live for. His eyes glinted with incomprehension as I was showered with blows from all the others, their attacks useless like being poked with a twig in kids’ games. All they did was create a bit of discomfort but no more than that.

And I had already set my sights on my victim.

In my opinion, he was the strongest Player amongst those gathered. Much more powerful than Omega even, not to mention her faithful hounds who were now busy yapping at me. He was the one I needed to control.

The activation of Mind Control felt unusual and unpleasant. It was as if I’d climbed into a strange car of an unknown make where all of the controls were in a foreign language, and now I had to start it. A car that had its clutch mounted on the steering wheel... and what’s this for a button? Is it the heating? — No, it’s the headlights! Not that it was that important, really. The main thing was to start it up, and we’d be sure to arrive somewhere eventually.

With every second, I felt better adapted to the process. Finally, Austerius' mind had given up as it broke under my pressure, allowing me to get under his skin and start issuing orders.

It felt funny, really. My mind seemed to have split. I was myself — and at the same time, I was somebody else several feet away, looking at myself. It felt spooky and unnatural.

Never mind. Let's sort through his spells now.

I activated his interface and froze in amazement. How many years had it taken him to amass them all? There were at least two hundred of them there. Reading through all of them would have taken too long.

I opened the Destruction tab. This was better: only 62 spells left.

I checked those which required the most mana. Like ***Blast***, for instance: with a range of twenty feet, it could break through twenty Veils and dealt quite decent damage. Plus it had some kind of stun after-effect. I should try that out.

Omega was the first to realize things weren't going according to plan. She shifted her gaze to Austerius and seemed to have frozen on the spot.

Still, I had no intention of waiting for her to get her act together. *Austerius, cast now!*

As soon as I'd given the order, Austerius — or rather, his mortal shell — jumped back to life. He waved his hands in the air as if forming a round object, then hurled the spell at me. It threw me back four or five feet — but I promptly got up again, which I couldn't say about the rest of the Players who grunted, groaned and struggled to move, even though they remained conscious.

You've killed a Player who was friendly to you.

-200 karma points. Current level: –23 260. You gravitate to the Dark Side.

A change in development branch available: ***Berserk****. In order to activate it, you need to select it as your new development branch within the next 24 hours.*

You've gained the Navigation skill.

You've gained the Frost spell.

Two things worried me. Firstly, why had that big moron been friendly toward me? An secondly, when had my karma managed to plummet so impressively?

It took me a few moments to realize I was in fact reading Austerius' messages in his own interface. That prompted a childish desire in me to play a dirty trick on him. Like when your big brother or sister leave their computer unattended for a minute, and you rename an important file, then watch them dissolve into tears, snot and threats.

No, that wasn't my case. Pointless playing any tricks on him, simply because I had no intention of leaving Austerius alive.

I killed one more Player with a Spiral which pierced right through him like a drill bit escaping a faulty mandrin, stripping him of a few Veils in the process. He went down without a sound. I didn't even know such imba tricks existed! Considering my meager mana numbers, a few protection spells wouldn't have saved me.

You've killed a Player who was friendly to you.

-200 karma points. Current level: –23 460. You gravitate to the Dark Side.

A change in development branch available: ***Splitter****. In order to activate it, you need to select it as your new development branch within the next 24 hours.*

You've gained the Basis spell.

This one didn't even have a skill to share. What were they like? Then again, considering the sheer number of Austerius' skills, I wasn't really surprised. I glimpsed the guy's drop-down menu: judging by its contents, he'd had a long and turbulent past.

Austerius' bizarre turncoat activities had attracted the attention of his fellow party members. Those Players still attacking me started turning round for a look. Omega darted toward her vassal, whipping out her marcasite sword.

I barely managed to stop her attack on him, forcing Austerius to block it — but after her third blow I realized that my fencing skill was infinitely inferior to that of the white-masked witch. So I just issued another command, putting Austerius into autopilot mode.

That gave me some time to handle more pressing problems. The Players who'd survived he Blast had begun to come round and get to their feet, all their attention drawn to the deranged Austerius. Personally, not being an adherent of chivalry, I didn't wait for them to turn back to me.

With a stroke of my Katzbalger, the arm of the nearest Player hung listlessly. Had he been a Light one, I might have severed it completely. He managed to dodge my dagger, somersaulting and landing back on his feet.

He then hurled something bright at me. I couldn't really tell what it was, something that apparently was supposed to hurt me or even blind me. My Impermeability didn't have the answer to this.

Then an incredible thing happened. My opponent stuffed his weapons back into his inventory and ran off. He'd skedaddled, there was no

doubt about it. Even Omega’s angry threat that she’d go to the ends of the earth to find him didn’t help.

I didn't chase after him, either. What’s the point in chasing a pawn when you have the queen before you?

The surviving Players didn’t even try to stand in my way. One of them crawled aside; another whacked me on the head a couple of times, apparently not yet realizing who it was standing in front of him. When I gave him a long close look, he dropped his weapon and put his hands in the air.

“So these are your best men?” I shouted to Omega.

I smiled, although I felt no joy, nor even satisfaction. Actually, I didn't feel anything. A global, all-consuming void filled me from the inside. I don’t think even the deaths of all the Horsemen would have rendered me euphoric. I just knew that they had to die — so that I and all the others could live. Just like Hunter had asked me to.

The two Horsemen were still locked in a desperate fight even though it was obvious that Omega was a more skilled opponent. In honest combat, Austerius wouldn’t have lasted long. But this fight was anything but honest.

I clenched my teeth — because even despite my Impermeability, my wound was still giving me problems — and headed toward them.

I was a mere four paces away from them when the unexpected happened. Omega grabbed Austerius by the throat.

Immediately, his whole interface went apeshit. His hit points began to dwindle with a frightening speed. It took me some time to occur to me that I should really have checked the number of charges he had available — but once I did, I knew what had happened.

Austerius' development branch worked differently from mine. His charges were converted into the seconds spent blocking other Players' abilities. That was all well and good — but now there was a big fat zero glowing against the word "Charges".

Sorry, man. I should have kept an eye on it. On the other hand, I would have killed you, anyway.

Still, it wasn't pleasant. Being kicked out of Austerius' mind felt like I'd been hit on the head with something heavy. A pair of invisible pincers squeezed my temples. I had to shook my stupid head in order to come back to my senses.

The next thing I saw was a big whack-off monstrous gun that Omega was pointing at me.

Bang! It felt like I'd been hit by a cannonball. I flew backwards through the snow, leaving a wide furrow in my wake and struggling to catch my breath, all the while trying to suppress a growing panic. This was nothing serious; just got winded, that's all. All I had to do was wait a little.

Omega threw her plasma gun over her shoulder and casually walked over to me. Now I had no doubt that what she'd fired had been a plasma gun. The last two surviving Players wisely gave her a wide birth, unwilling to get on their mistress' bad side.

"Surely you don't think that I wasn't prepared for this turn of events, do you?" she asked. "I know more about Destroyer than you think."

I finally managed to grab a lungful of cold air. My fear began to abate. One thing we'd just found out: namely, that I couldn't be killed with a plasma gun. Still, it did have one unpleasant property: its kinetic energy could throw me around a bit. Which wasn't a good thing, considering that the skill's three-minute duration time had almost expired.

“Don’t worry,” Omega said, as if reading my thoughts. “I knew very well that I can’t kill you for another minute and a half. But that’s not long, is it? And I’m quite good at waiting.”

When I tried to scramble back to my feet, she fired another round. I wished she’d aimed better — because if I was already quite used to getting struck in the chest, a sledgehammer to the kidneys came as a bit of a surprise. While I squirmed on the ground, preparing to piss blood, she burst out laughing.

“It’s amazing how many new toys have come out while I was locked up. The central worlds don’t hang about. Some of it even rubs off on this filthy backwater. Cesspit has progressed quite a bit over the last thousand years.”

“I you came here more often, you’d be even more surprised,” I squeaked because I couldn’t speak like a normal human being.

“What a brave little mutt,” Omega said, relaxing completely. “Even when it’s being kicked to death, it’ll still try to bite you.”

“That’s just how I am. I’m an obstinate bastard.”

My brain kicked back into gear and started working like never before. Funny, really: you’d go to any lengths when you need to survive. I could see that Omega had no intention of letting me get anywhere near her. But even so, I still had a few good cards left in my hand.

I glanced at the lamppost by my side and promptly averted my eyes. I didn't want her to notice what I was looking at.

“So let’s wait,” she went on. “Admittedly, I’ve been thinking about sharing your Avatars with my hare-brained buddies. Don’t get me wrong: I’m not some sentimental little fool. It just makes it so much easier to come to power when your assistants are also strong. But Austerius is dead now, and Slayer is lying unconscious. And I have no intention of waiting for

another lucky coincidence like this. It’s better for me to take Savior now than to get nothing later.”

I scrambled to my knees and gave myself an almighty push, kicking myself into the air.

Immediately a plasma charge struck me in the back giving me the impression my spine had crumbled into my underpants. Just you wait, witch. We’re not done yet.

“What do you need Savior for?” I asked, rolling onto my back.

The lamppost was now directly above me. But that wasn’t the most important, because Omega was already approaching me too, without allowing me to get too close to her but also not letting me get too far away.

“You’re one of the bad guys, aren’t you?” I insisted.

“That’s just a point of view. Good guys, bad guys... the only thing that matters is the abilities that come with this Avatar — but of course, you don’t have the slightest idea what kinds of abilities you can get once you make it to 10,000 karma points. Or 50,000, for that matter. Stupid boy! All those riches falling into your lap, and you didn't even know how to use them.”

“Making 10,000 karma points might take you a long time, Mrs. Scrouge.”

“That’s what you think,” she said, ignoring my quip. Or maybe she just didn’t understand the sarcasm. “I have my own secret ways.”

“It’s called cheats these days.”

I made one last desperate push.

Another shot thundered, shoving me out of the illuminated area into the darkness. My body had turned into a single black and blue bruise — but now was the time for me to act.

Unwittingly, she gave me a carte blanche. “Don’t go too far! I’ll just reload, and we’ll carry on.”

My Impermeability was still active, even though it wouldn’t have helped me. I peeled off Destroyer’s Avatar, replacing it with the mask of Conqueror.

Funnily enough, I felt better straight away. This must have been the proverbial second wind. And this was the Omega I’d been waiting for, because she was now busy looking at her gun, not at the lamppost.

Time to activate Cavalry Charge. I made another dash, just about reaching the lamppost with my sword.

Admittedly, right until the end I hadn’t been sure how it would all turn out. I wasn’t interested in the wavelength, only in its height. As far as I remembered, it had to be divisible by five yards.

The resulting hurricane ripped the lamppost apart into a cloud of tiny fragments, raising them into the air and sweeping around a flabbergasted Omega. Unfortunately, the bits of cast iron and construction steel seemed unwilling to hurt her. Of course. The Charge was meant to destroy buildings but not living beings.

Not that it mattered anymore. The lamppost might have been destroyed but the lamp itself was still standing on its long fancy leg. Which promptly collapsed onto the bewildered Omega — not killing her of course but knocking her off her feet and pinning her down with its sheer weight.

I harbored no illusions about it: an obstacle like this could only delay her for a couple of seconds. Still, it was already good enough.

I activated Leader and very nearly collapsed under the weight of a fancy black and silver suit of armor. A red aura enveloped the knife and the Katzbalger in my hands, then dissolved without a trace.

I headed toward Omega.

I'd rather have run toward her, of course, as I seemed to have enough strength to do so now that I'd changed Avatars. But all fifty pounds of the suit were weighing me down, discouraging any such fervor. So I just walked toward her in the preoccupied gait of someone in great haste.

By now, she'd already regained her composure and shrugged off the pieces of lamppost as if they didn't weigh anything. She grabbed her plasma gun and pointed it at me — but she didn't get the chance to fire it.

Whooshing, my Katzbalger drew an arc through the air, severing the hand holding the gun. To say I was surprised would be an understatement. That's a reinforced attack for you!

I had to give Omega her due: she hadn't even cried out in pain. She just cast some kind of spell. Its greenish glow flew from her fingers and hit me in the chest while she attempted to crawl away.

Under any other circumstances, a spell like that would have crushed me. But now it just grazed me. My HP meter blinked and shrank ever so slightly.

Omega wasn't in a hurry to die, either. The bleeding from her severed hand had stopped while she attempted to crawl away, casting spells to strike back at me.

"Where are you going?" I didn't recognize my own voice which thundered out of my closed black helmet. "I thought you wanted Savior!"

She didn't reply. Instead, she cast my favorite Combat Telekinesis which did indeed throw me back a couple of feet but failed to knock me

down. Then she rose to her feet, a sword in her surviving hand.

“Come on, snotnose. Let’s see which one of us is the strongest.”

“I’m coming!”

I took a swing, aiming a slashing blow at her, but Omega proved faster. At the very last moment, just as my hand was already coming down, she dropped her sword and grabbed at my blade with her bare hand.

I sensed the power she exuded. All things considered, including my summoned armor, we were basically equal.

“You see, I can kill any creature,” she said. “I don’t even need to touch their bodies; touching their armor or sword is sufficient. Come on, look your death in the face one last time.”

She ran her severed stump across her cheek, peeling away the mask. The bleeding wrist left a crimson trail in its wake which stank sickeningly of fresh meat straight from the butcher’s shop.

But her face was even more terrifying. One half of it lacked a nose, pitted and pockmarked by some horrific disease; the other half was inhumanly beautiful.

For some reason, I remembered the beautiful tall creature I’d seen back in the Community talking to the mechanoid. My Intuition nodded its agreement. Omega wasn’t a human being — she was a half-blood, just like me.

Her hand filled with heat which I could feel even from where I stood. She was preparing to destroy me.

Still, my sword remained cold.

I saw surprise in Omega’s beautiful eyes untouched by the mysterious sickness.

“Indestructible is immune to both Pyrolysis and Necro Magic,” I said, answering her silent question, then sliced off her other hand — not all of it though, leaving her the thumb and part of the palm.

Now she did scream — probably, not so much from pain as with fear. Blood was gushing out of the fresh wound as Omega waved the stump in the air trying to shield herself from me.

I felt neither joy nor disappointment. I was empty inside. I raised the sword and chopped off her head so easily as if it were a cabbage.

You’ve killed a Player who was hostile to you.

A change in development branch available: Pyrolizer. In order to activate it, you need to select it as your new development branch within the next 24 hours.

You can now claim one of the following Avatars: Reaper, Spy, Hermit, Fugitive. If you don’t do so within the next 24 hours, one of the above Avatars will be awarded to you at random.

You’ve gained the Update skill.

You’ve gained the Fog spell.

Your fame has increased to 16.

Your fame has increased to 17.

Your fame has increased to 18.

I turned to where Slayer had just been lying but saw no one. The two surviving Players had also made themselves scarce: they must have

treasured their backsides more than their dead mistresses' interests. Especially now that she'd turned to dust.

I removed my black mask. My suit of armor promptly vanished into thin air.

I slumped to my knees, exhausted. The sword fell from my hand as I buried my fingers in the thick snow. The cold air singed my throat; hot tears streamed down my cheeks.

I hadn't even noticed the figures of several Players coming out of the darkness. One of them left the group, approached me and touched my shoulder.

I looked up at Oliverio. "Why?"

"We couldn't do it any other way," the Magister replied, giving me a hug.

As he pressed me to his soft, flabby self, I finally broke out sobbing.

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Chapter 35

ALL OF US NEED ANSWERS. To the eternal questions (like “Who are we? Where did we come from? And where are we going?”) and to the most simple and mundane ones.

As man’s curiosity knows no boundaries, there is nothing worse than leaving a question without an answer. They will torment you like vultures tormenting an exhausted traveler lost in the desert.

I looked at the Seers and Guards scurrying around the recent battlefield as I waited for Oliverio to come back. He was surveying the scene, all businesslike, issuing orders and walking on the snow which had been churned up by a multitude of feet. His orders mainly concerned the collection of loot dropped by dead Players. Now and again, he cast wary glances at me as if worried about the mental state of yours truly. Which, by the way, he had no reason to do.

I’d already calmed down. I was sitting on my backside cross-legged, burying my hands in the snow behind my back. My fingers tingled unpleasantly but it was the only evidence to the fact that I was still alive. Everything else which was happening around me left me absolutely cold inside. I hadn’t even looked at all the spells, skills and Avatars I’d received. At the moment, none of it mattered.

One of the Horsemen was on the run and two more were dead. As was Hunter. I’d fulfilled the prophesy that the Oracle had told him about. I’d killed my own teacher. The rest was irrelevant.

The Magister walked over to me. “You okay?”

“As right as rain. Don’t you think it’s a stupid question?” I replied, feeling no anger or irritation, not even noticing that I was being a bit too familiar with him.

“It is indeed. There’s nothing worse than trying to comfort someone.”

“I don’t need comforting. You’d better just tell me the truth. You knew, didn’t you?”

“When I took your hand, I saw it straight away,” Oliverio admitted. “I knew that the battle we would wage was only a ruse. The main battle was to take place here. So I went and told the Grand Master straight away.

“You saw Hunter die,” I said, stating the obvious.

“I did. Had we interfered, it might have changed everything, including the outcome of the fight.”

“So the Grand Master chose the lesser of two evils.”

“We’d already had too many casualties. You can’t even imagine what could have happened here had Omega gotten real power by laying her hands on one of your Avatars.”

“I know. She told me.”

“And by the way,” he said, pointing at the distance, “a lot of people died there. Quite a few Players, too.”

“Here too. Never mind. I got the picture.”

I struggled to my feet. My legs felt numb — either from all the sitting or simply because I was exhausted. My wound, by the way, had slightly closed. It didn’t bleed anymore. That was Regeneration at work; I’d forgotten all about it. Still, the pain hadn’t gone completely.

“Where are you going?” Oliverio asked, surprised.

“Over there,” I pointed in the direction that I’d come from.

“Wait up. I need to show you something.”

He took me to the end of the apartment block. There, six snapdrakes were wheezing next to several minivans. One of the vans was parked up with its back to us. Its trunk was wide open, allowing me to see inside.

Lily was sitting there, constantly nodding to a Player who was talking to her. She was holding a steaming plastic cup — probably tea. But most importantly, she wasn’t a commoner anymore. According to my Insight, my sister had a new moniker: ***Light Bug***.

Nothing surprising. So many Players had died here today. Probably, quite a few of the local residents had been “lucky” enough to discover a new world. The important thing was, the driver of the van had been the first to die. Not Arthan. Which meant that the Order of Silver Mark had seen everything. They’d only interfered when they’d realized I wasn’t going to endure on my own. No, scratch that. They hadn’t interfered — Hunter had. The thought made me feel even shittier.

“Come,” Oliverio tugged my arm. “You can explain everything to your sister yourself.”

I shook my head. “I don’t want to. I’d rather you guys do it. She very nearly died because of me.”

“That wasn’t your fault.”

“Yes, it was. It was entirely my fault. I seem to be a magnet for trouble. And all those around me subject themselves to additional dangers. My sister, my family, my girlfriend...”

“That’s all emotion. I’m more than sure tomorrow you’re gonna calm down and look at everything with a cool head. Okay, maybe not tomorrow.”

“Of course. You know everything better than I do, don’t you? Who am I gonna kill next — Arts? Litius? Or my own father?”

“Nothing’s gonna happen to them. By the way, we’ll be closely guading your family while Slayer is still running loose. And as for what happened today, we’ve got one of the Guards at your parents’ place right now. His development branch is Hedepath. He’s one of the mop-up team.”

“Is that supposed to tell me something?”

“Nothing really. Only that your family won’t remember how this evening ended. They’ll know all about your fiancée so that they’ll be able to say hello to her when they meet her in the street, but as for the rest...”

“You seem to have thought of everything.”

“We’re not amateurs, Sergei. We’re a very old Order.”

“But not as old as the Silver Mark.”

“We’re called Missionaries. That used to be our proper name. And no, we’re not as old as they are. What a shame it had to end like this.”

“Oliverio, tell me the truth: did they also know what was about to happen?”

The Magister fell silent for a moment. Even in the dusk, I could see how tense his face was. He must have been pondering whether to lie to me or tell me the truth. His cheek twitched; then his flabby chin wobbled as he nodded.

“Yes, they did know. More or less. We’d met up with Simon and Matthew a couple of hours before it all kicked off. They knew they were going to die. They knew the Order would cease to exist. But you were going to survive, and that was all that mattered to them.”

“Because of what — my purpose?” I asked sarcastically, feeling my voice quiver. “Or what is it, fate? Providence?”

“Just consider it their educated choice. We all have our goals and ideals. One can sacrifice a lot for all this.”

“You sing a good song,” I spat on the snow, unable to contain myself any longer. “Still, all I’ve been seeing just lately is all kinds of people making others pull chestnuts out of the fire for them. And you know what, Oliverio?”

He didn’t reply, just lowered his head, preparing to listen. I knew that he wasn’t the mastermind of all this multi-move combination. He wasn’t the one who’d issued the orders not to interfere. Still, Oliverio was one of the system’s top brass — the system which right now I hated with a vengeance.

“Go and fuck yourselves, all of you. You can stuff your Avatars, purposes and expectations where the sun don’t shine. To tell you the truth, I’m sick and tired of you all.”

“But Sergei...”

“Save your breath. I don’t need anything from you. Just leave me alone,” I swung round and headed back in the direction I’d come from.

To Oliverio’s credit, he didn't follow me in order to reassure me or beg me to give them another chance. He didn’t budge. Still, a couple of seconds later I received a rather funny message:

You’ve received a new title: Eye of the Seers.

Allows you to go unhindered in places which are the property of the Order, as well as seek assistance from its members.

The last time they'd issued me a title, at least they'd explained what it was for. And now they'd just tossed it to me like one tosses a bone to the dog.

I raised my hand and gave them the finger — not to Oliverio even but to all the Seers. They'd already heard my last word.

But the worst thing awaited me just around the corner.

The blown-up apartment block, cleft in two and gutted as if crushed from above; the fire trucks and police cars flashing their blues and twos; the suffocating black sky looking down at this pointless exercise. Groups of half-naked people who'd run out of their homes dressed in what they had, some wrapped in blankets, others in oversized winter jackets. A disheveled gray-haired women was trying to force her way back to one of the front doors, screaming. The sickly sweet smell of death hung and spread in the air.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and stopped against my will, studying the crowd. I noticed a few Guards among them, one of them talking to a high-ranking policeman who kept nodding his agreement. No points for guessing: they would put it down to a domestic gas explosion. Or they just might find a scape goat, some would-be chemist who kept explosives in his apartment. It made me feel like shit.

I spat on the frozen tarmac freshly swept clean of the snow by janitors and staggered away.

I was absolutely drained. I wobbled like a drunk not recognizing either the street or the direction in which I was heading. Actually, why not?

I saw a small shop two houses further down the road. The neon sign above it proudly said *Supermarket* even though the letter "U" wasn't lit up. But once I'd stepped inside, I recognized it as one of the last remains of the Soviet era which has somehow survived until the present day. I studied its displays set up in the best minimalistic style of Soviet-time food shortages

and chuckled. The only thing that mattered was that it had an alcohol license.

I walked over to a squat peroxide-blonde saleswoman. “I’d like two bottles of vodka.”

“We don’t sell alcohol to anybody underage. You either show me your ID or—”

“Listen up, bitch: just give me the vodka. You say one more word, and I’ll spread you all over the floor!”

Whether it was my maxed-out Eloquence or she cottoned on real quick that I wasn’t screwing around. You wouldn’t argue with a hungry bear or a rabid dog.

She gave frightened nod and asked again. “Which one do you want?”

“The cheapest. Something that would make me wanna die tomorrow morning.”

The bottles clinked. I put one in my raincoat pocket and kept the other one in my hand. I lobbed a thousand-ruble note[9] onto the counter and went out into the street.

I unscrewed the cap and tried to take a few quick swigs but choked and exploded into a bout of coughing, very nearly throwing up. Even at my age, I’d never managed to master drinking straight from the bottle.

I headed unhurriedly in the direction of where I thought I might find my house, occasionally forcing down a swig of the foul booze which seemed to glitter under the lamplight. Had they cut it with acetone or something? I didn't give a shit, anyway. My feet kept on carrying me along

the empty evening streets. Occasional ambulances flashed past — and I knew exactly where they were heading.

“Have you got a smoke for me, buddy?” I asked a commoner who was coming toward me. It was a rhetorical question because the guy had just flicked his lighter and taken a drag on his cigarette.

He looked at me like I was a piece of dog shit and gave it some thought. “This is my last one.”

“Good. I only need one,” I snatched the cigarette from between his fingers.

“Are you fucking nuts?” he tensed up, about to launch himself at me. He was enormous — almost like Traug, really. I could figure him out: he couldn’t see a Player in me. All he could see was a puny teenager whom he could swat with his little finger.

Well, screw him. My arm shot out as I cast Combat Telekinesis.

Your Mysticism skill has increased to level 13.

You’ve hurt a Commoner who is neutral to you.

-20 karma points. Current level: -1200. You gravitate to the Dark Side

I gulped some more vodka an took a drag on the cigarette. The nicotine sent a pleasant wave of contentment through my body. My first cigarette of the day. Or the evening, rather.

By now I was quite tipsy and walked with a noticeable swagger. When I reached the end of the street, I turned round and checked on the man still lying on the ground. Grunting, he was groping around in the snow looking for some kind of support.

“You think I’m a bad bastard?” I asked him although he was unlikely to have heard me. “Oh yes. I’m real bad. I’m horrible. And from now on, it’s gonna get a whole lot worse.”

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by Dem Mikhailov

City of Goblins (In the System Book #1) LitRPG Series
by Petr Zhgulyov

The Keepers of Limbo (The Range Book #1) LitRPG Series
by Yuri Ulengov

Small Unit Tactics LitRPG Series
by Alexander Romanov

World of the Changed LitRPG Series
by Vasily Mahanenko

Rogue Merchant LitRPG Series
by Roman Prokofiev

Project Stellar LitRPG Series
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Clan Dominance: The Sleepless Ones LitRPG Series
by Dem Mikhailov

The Alchemist LitRPG Series
by Vasily Mahanenko

The Dark Champion (Interworld Network Book #3) LitRPG Series
by Dmitry Bilik

ALL BOOKS BY DMITRY BILIK:

Interworld Network LitRPG Series:

The Time Master (Interworld Network Book I)
Avatar of Light (Interworld Network Book 2)
The Dark Champion (Interworld Network Book #3)

Short Stories:

You're in Game!
(LitRPG Stories from Bestselling Authors)

You're In Game-2
(More LitRPG stories set in your favorite worlds!)

New Release!

Please meet our new author! Kaitlyn Weiss writes in the genres of romantic fantasy, urban fantasy and fantasy adventure. You can download her first book for free on Amazon: Captive of the Shadows (The Fairy Code Book #1).
Captive of the Shadows (The Fairy Code Book #1)
by Kaitlyn Weiss

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In order to have new books of the series translated faster, we need your help and support! Please consider leaving a review or spread the word by recommending *The Dark Champion* to your friends and posting the link on social media. The more people buy the book, the sooner we'll be able to make new translations available.
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About the Author

Dmitry Bilik was born in 1986 in a small Russian town. A passionate reader since childhood, he loved nothing better than to create worlds of his own. He devoured classical sci fi and fantasy - so no wonder that by his early teens, he'd begun writing his own stories.

His path to authorhood, however, proved windier than he'd imagined. Dmitry graduated from college and went on to study at university. Then he got married. All those years, he treated writing as a hobby - as his own way to escape reality. Only ten years after he'd first put pen to paper, Dmitry started publishing his writing on the Internet, experimenting with a number of genres.

Today, Interworld Network is Dmitry's most popular series which has become a bestseller overnight, combining the best of LitRPG and urban fantasy.

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[1] A line from *Tutankhamun*, a Russian cult song by the band Nautilus Pompilius

[2] The fictional city where the series is set is based on the Russian city of Nizhny Novgorod. Most of the city's landmarks mentioned in the series are real, down to public transportation lines.

[3] A line from the 1824 Russian comedy *Woe from Wit* by the Russian poet and diplomat Alexander Griboedov

[4] Two hundred rubles: about $5

[5] Fifty rubles: about $ 0.70.

[6] Armenia produces some of the finest brandies in the world

[7] Hygiene-conscious ever since the 1918-1920 pandemic of Spanish flu, Russians always wash their hands upon coming indoors.

[8] Mantu: large beef dumplings peculiar to Russia's Middle-Eastern regions.

[9] A thousand rubles: about $13

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